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FANT-ASIA

The genre auteurs of horror,
fantasy and science fiction
from Hong Kong and Japan



TALES FROM
THE HOOD:
URBAN HORROR

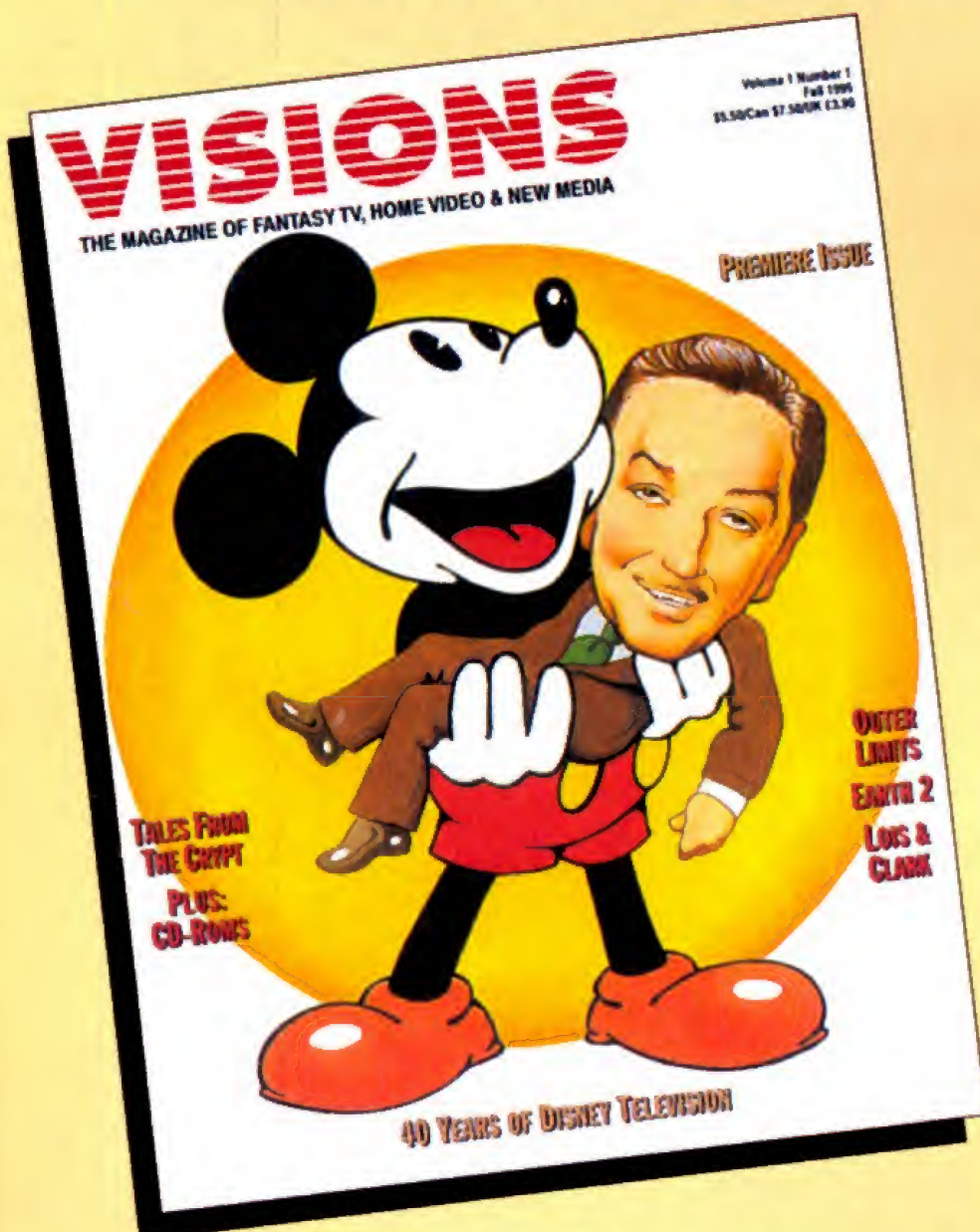
Volume 2 Number 4

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Volume 16 No 4/5



Volume 14 No 4/5



Volume 20 No 1/2

COMING NEXT IN IMAGI-MOVIES!

Tired of the same old King? Do you think STAR TREK's drek? Looking for a magazine that brings you in-depth analysis and criticism of the best in science-fiction, fantasy, and horror cinema? Well then, *Imagi-Movies* is just what you're looking for. Over the course of recent issues we have taken our readers back in time to "When Harryhausen Ruled the Earth," to unearth the secrets of Dynamation Dinosaurs, and "Beyond Dracula—into the Realm of the Post-Modern Vampire" to reveal how Anne Rice's INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE overturned cobwebby cliches and revitalized the genre. These and other cover stories, ranging from WOLF to H.R. Giger to WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE, examined their subjects in a way that the competition just can't match, exploring their context and appeal, the background and history that makes the material so fascinating in the first place.

Don't miss our exhaustive on-the-set report of the making of BATMAN FOREVER, starring Val Kilmer, Tommy Lee Jones and Jim Carrey. Find out how dark the new Dark Knight will be now that Joel Schumacher has taken over the director's reins from Tim Burton, who abandoned the series in favor of making a CATWOMAN movie instead. Plus, an extensive look back at BATMAN RETURNS, the quirky 1992 sequel that surpassed the stolid original.

Also next issue, CRYING FREEMAN and FIST OF THE NORTH STAR; behind-the-scenes of the live-action films based on Japanese anime; "Sequel Mania:" an examination of Hollywood's obsession with roman numerals; retrospectives on the history of Mexican Fantasy Cinema and the career of '50s sci-fi stalwart Beverly Garland; and our usual exhaustive review section on cinema, laser and video.

While striving to remain on the cutting edge of what's new in the genre, we also provide the kind of "Classic Coverage" that serious devotees of the genre have been demanding: reviews of all films in current release; profiles of actors, writers and directors with a proven talent for producing quality work; and retrospectives of the classics that sparked our initial interest in imaginative cinema. Subscribe to the next four quarterly issues of *Imagi-Movies* for just \$18, a savings of \$4 off the newsstand price of \$5.50 and select your rare back issue of *Cinefantastique* from among those pictured and described above and on page 63 (offer good to new subscribers only). Also subscribe to *Visions* and take two free issues!!



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"The Magazine of Cinematic Imagination"

SUMMER 1995

CINEMAGINATION

When it comes to *cinemagination*, the American film industry, particularly the American low-budget film industry, sucks. As a long-time fan of American film, I hate to say that. I never have cared for pseudo-intellectual film critics who get their rocks off by bemoaning the sorry state of the art; after all, it's easy to put down what you know, while overpraising foreign films just because they're a little different or more ambitious, whether or not they're totally successful.

My revelation about this year's domestic output came during a midnight screening of the Japanese science-fiction flick ZERAM. The film features a principal cast of three, a handful of sets, some available locations, a smattering of gooey prosthetics, a few stop-motion shots, and a small dose of flashy opticals; in other words, it has no more production value than the average Full Moon piece of crap you rent for two bucks. The difference is that this movie is actually great fun, with no need to apologize for not being a multi-million dollar mega-production. Rent this effort on video, if you can find it, and you will realize something we should never forget: that "low-budget" need not be synonymous with "no talent." With a little skill and ambition, filmmakers can provide great entertainment. There's just no reason to settle for the shoddy, campy drek pumped out over here.

Of course, good films do emerge (THE CROW, WOLF, WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE), but today these seem like exceptions. The American industry doesn't always lack quality; it lacks consistency. For an industry that does consistently produce great fantasy films in the way that Universal or Hammer used to provide classic horror movies, you have to look elsewhere—to the Far East, specifically. That's why we have devoted this cover story to Fant-Asia Films. And it's more than appropriate—it's almost inevitable—that it would occupy the same issue with our "1994 in Review" round up of last year's best.

Steve Biodrowski



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EAGERLY AWAITED

MARY REILLY (TriStar)

The talented DANGEROUS LIAISONS team of director Stephen Frears and screenwriter Christopher Hampton go back into another period costume picture, this one a retelling of the famous Robert Louis Stevenson story "The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," as seen from the point-of-view of the eponymous maid (Julia Roberts, doing her best to look dowdy). The schizophrenic doctor is played by John Malkovich, who had hoped to portray the transformation without makeup. The big question: can this team of Brits really show Americans how to make 'em, or will this be another MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN? Based on the novel by Valerie Martin.



CANDYMAN II (Gramercy) Now playing

Tony Todd returns in the sequel to the most highly regarded Clive Barker adaptation yet. This time, Bill Condon (SISTER, SISTER) directs from a script by first-timer Mark Kruger. "This is not a typical slasher film," says Condon. "The film's concept appeals to the audience on many different levels. It's the first horror movie to be about the black experience with racism; it's a Gothic love story; it's about one woman's journey to find herself, and it's about American mythology."



CASPER (Universal) May 26

Christina Ricci (THE ADDAMS FAMILY) and Bill Pullman (SERPENT AND THE RAINBOW) play a daughter-and-father team of self-styled "ghost therapists" in a film which had its title mysteriously shortened from its source material, the old CASPER THE FRIENDLY GHOST cartoons. (So maybe the new Casper isn't so friendly?) Universal is apparently aiming for a 1990's BEETLEJUICE. Expect lots of animation, both computer and conventional, hitting you over the head with special effects.

DAEMONS (Dimension) April

HIGHLANDER's Gregory Widen writes and directs a fantasy about a war waged on Earth by a legion of renegade angels, led by Gabriel (played by Christopher Walken). As the renegade angels struggle for possession of a soul that will lead to their victory, a former priest-turned-cop (Elias Koteas) and an elementary school teacher (CANDYMAN's Virginia Madsen) battle the forces of evil to save the child's life. Eric Stoltz (PULP FICTION) also stars.

DEATH MACHINE (Trimark) Spring

This English-produced science-fiction thriller starring Brad Douriff finally reaches American screens, although in a different cut from the one that earned kudos on the continent.

DON JUAN DEMARCO (New Line) Spring

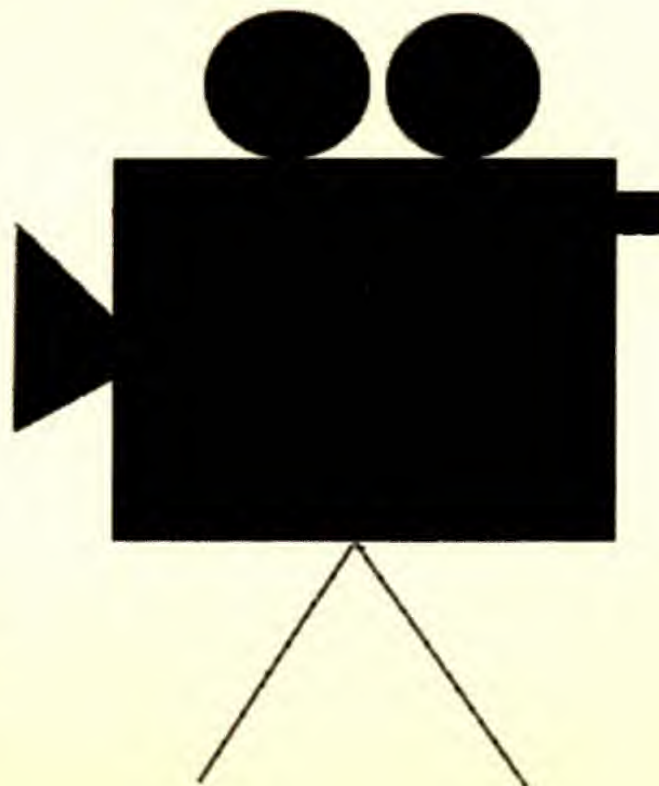
Marlon Brando makes a rare return to the big screen, playing a psychiatrist whose patient (Johnny Depp) may be the reincarnation of the title character. If he is Don Juan, then it's a genre film; if not, we just wasted an inch of magazine space.

DR. JEKYLL AND MS. HYDE (Savoy) April 12

Contemporary comedy in which Tim Daly, as a descendant of you-know-who, stumbles upon the famous formula and transforms himself into herself. This distaff side of the doppelganger is played by Sean Young. Lysette Anthony (KRULL, DARK SHADOWS) co-stars.

RELEASE SCHEDULE

Upcoming imagi-movies at a glance, along with a word or two for the discriminating viewer.



FLUKE (MGM) Spring

Matthew Modine, Nancy Travis, and Eric Stoltz star in this adaptation of British horror novelist James Herbert's uncharacteristically light-hearted tale of a dog who realizes he is a reincarnation of a human being.

GLENORKY (Triumph) May

Mark Harmon stars in this comedy-adventure, set at a Canadian resort. The title refers to a dweller in the nearby lake, sort of the local equivalent of the Loch Ness Monster. With two kids prominent in the cast, expect a fantasy FREE WILLY. Beats Gramercy's LOCH NESS, slated for November, into theatres by several months.

THE GOOFY MOVIE (Disney) April 7

The upright walking dog finally gets to step out from behind his more famous starring and take the lead in his own animated feature.

LORD OF ILLUSIONS (UA) ?

United Artists originally had this new effort from writer-director Clive Barker slated for a March release until the first rough cut came in. Barker supporters who have seen it claim that the footage was good; it just needed some retooling in the editing room. But then, the more cynical of us say, "Look at what happened when they tried to fix NIGHTBREED in the editing room."

MORTAL KOMBAT (New Line) Spring

Christopher Lambert takes another shot at science-fiction stardom, this time in an adaptation of a video game. Okay, STREETFIGHTER did decent business, but has anyone looked at the box office returns on SUPER MARIO BROTHERS and DOUBLE DRAGON?

THE PEBBLE AND THE PENGUIN (MGM) April 12

Don Bluth's last film under his deal at MGM, which now owns his former animation facility in Ireland. We can only hope this is better than last year's THUMBELINA, not to mention TROLL IN CENTRAL PARK, which ended up bypassing theatres and going direct-to-video.

RAMPO (Samuel Goldwyn) Spring

This Japanese effort concerns an author whose imaginary murders start taking place in real life. Is he acting out his own fiction, or is his fantasy coming to life, a la Oliver Stone's awful debut SEIZURE?

TALL TALE (Disney) Now playing

This film attempts to combine comedy, fantasy, and adventure in a story of a young boy (Nick Stahl) who conjures up three legendary Old West characters, including Patrick Swayze as Pecos Bill, to help save the family farm when it's threatened by bad guy Scott Glenn.

TANK GIRL (U.A.) Spring

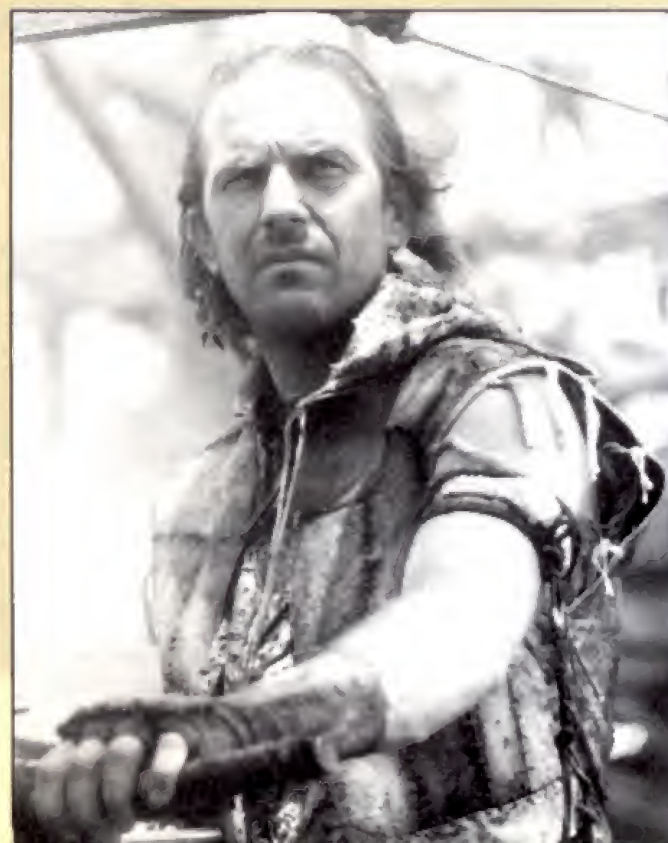
Producer-turned-director Rachel Talalay is back behind the camera with this post-apocalyptic tale about a female ROAD WARRIOR (Lori Petty) in (yup) a tank. Apparently, the studio failed to screen Talalay's previous directing efforts (GHOST IN THE MACHINE, FREDDY'S DEAD) before shelling out the cash. At least Malcolm McDowell (coasting off career heat generated by his role in GENERATIONS) plays the baddy, so there will be something to watch.

DON'T HOLD YOUR BREATH

WATERWORLD (Universal)

This mega-budget movie (over \$100,000,000 by most accounts, though the studio prefers not to confirm such profligate spending) has been not only press shy but sometimes openly hostile—seldom a good sign. One source who worked on the film during its location shoot in Hawaii termed it "a futuristic cowboy-and-Indian movie, like ROAD WARRIOR on water, but with Kevin Costner instead of Mel Gibson." Director Kevin Reynolds' previous effort was the pictorially beautiful but ridiculously preachy RAPA NUI. On the other hand, his teaming with Costner, ROBIN HOOD, PRINCE OF THIEVES, survived critical slings and arrows to become a big adventure hit a couple years ago.

Summer



SINISTER SENTINEL

“INTERVIEW” AUTHOR *Variety* ad gives her views on film.

Well, now we know it's a good thing that Anne Rice became a novelist instead of a film critic. In the December 23 edition of *Daily Variety*, she bought an unprecedented eight-page advertising supplement to voice her views on the film adaptation of her novel *Interview with the Vampire*, and it is one of the strangest pieces of writing of her career.

Her explanation for what she calls “an American gesture” is that she didn't want to wait to be “asked, interviewed, or packaged” by journalists or editors “who might for valid reason cut” her remarks or “quote them out of context.” What she fails to explain adequately is why this “Special Message from Anne Rice to her Readers” appears in a publication read predominantly not by her fans but by members of the film industry.

Clearly, the gesture is an attempt to get back in the good graces of producer David Geffen, in the hope of being involved with a *LESTAT* sequel (“I hope I get to write the script for the movie”) now that the first film has grossed over



In an unprecedented move, Anne Rice gave her views on every possible facet of *INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE*, via an 8-page ad in *Daily Variety*.

\$100 million. Fine: after all the negative press she gave to *INTERVIEW* during production, it's understandable that she would want to mend fences. What's a little bit more strange is her actual opinions of the film.

What emerges from her laundry list of favorite moments is that every time an actor stares blankly in close-up, she projects four novels worth of feeling onto that face. No wonder she loves Cruise so much (“Tom's Lestat will be re-

membered the way Olivier's Hamlet is remembered”): His *tabula rasa* expression is the perfect screen for this type of projection.

Even stranger are her statements that the film should not have taken an R-rated approach, so that children could see it, and that *Lestat* is her “hero.” Vampires are interesting precisely because of their ambiguous qualities. Trying to whitewash *Lestat*'s behavior as heroic bodes ill for the next (final?) *Vampire Chronicle*. □

Not-So-Dark Knight

by Steve Biodrowski

Sometimes it seems Hollywood always learns the wrong lessons. If a sequel fails to perform up to expectations, do studios stop making sequels and focus on more interesting and original films. Hardly. After the so-called box office disappointment of *BATMAN RETURNS* (a “meager” \$180 million in U.S. currency), Warner Brothers opted for a less quirky third film, hoping to regain the box office success of the artistically inferior original. Warning signs started as early as last year, when director Joel Schumacher (replacing Tim Burton) met with potential merchandizing tie-in companies, such as McDonalds, and promised that this film would appease parents howling in outrage over exposing their youngsters to Burton's dark vision of the first sequel. “Well, you know, they're called ‘comic books’; they're not called ‘tragic books,’ so we tried to make a living comic book,”

continued on page 6

Vampires in limbo

by Anthony P. Montesano
with Dan Persons

BRAM STOKER'S *DRACULA* did over \$100 million worldwide, and *INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE* did that much in the U.S. alone. So you'd think Hollywood would be jumping on the vampire bandwagon. Well, you'd be right, in terms of producing films. But when it comes to showing them, that's something else again. For example, even though already completed, the Eddie Murphy comedy *A VAMPIRE IN BROOKLYN*, directed by Wes Craven, is sitting on the shelf. According to Paramount, who own domestic distribution rights, contractual obligations required that the film not be released before Eddie Murphy's next fantasy film effort, the remake of Jerry Lewis's *THE NUTTY PROFESSOR*, which hasn't even started filming yet!

Another entry in the fang sweepstakes that won't be coming soon to a theatre near you is *NADJA*, this despite a favorable *Daily Variety* review garnered during its screening at the Toronto Film Festival last year. The Samuel Goldwyn Company had announced acquiring domestic rights, then abruptly backed out with little fanfare and no explanation.

The film is the work of writer/director Michael Almereyda, whose 1992 film *ANOTHER GIRL, ANOTHER PLANET* brought tremendous media attention to the Pixelvision PXL 2000, which he used in place of professional equipment. Ironically, the \$200 children's camera (TV monitor included), which recorded its images on an audio tape cassette, had been discontinued by Fisher Price by the time Almereyda put it on the map. Shot in one week, mainly in Almereyda's New York tenement, *ANOTHER GIRL, ANOTHER PLANET* cost in the neighborhood of \$12,000 (including the blow-up to 16mm). Selected for the Museum of Modern Art/Film Society of Lincoln Center festival “New Directors/New Films,” the film's use of the Pixelvision process caught the attention of Hollywood's established filmmakers, including David Lynch (*TWIN*

please turn the page

Production Starts GOLDENEYE

This January, Pierce Brosnan finally went before the cameras in Russia as Ian Fleming's superspy, James Bond. The script for the \$40 million production, by *CLIFF-HANGER*'s Michel France and British novelist Jeffrey Caine, deals with a Mafia-linked black market in nuclear weapons. Despite rumors, Anthony Hopkins is not playing the villain. Let's hope director Martin Campbell has improved considerably since *NO ESCAPE*.

VIRTUOSITY

Working from a script by Eric Berrnt, Brett Leonard directs Denzel Washington as a convict with the skills needed to catch a rather unique criminal. Kelly Lynch plays the psychiatrist and love interest, and Russell Crowe is Sid 6.7., an artificial man created in a police virtual reality simulator who has managed to emerge into the real world. Paramount hopes for a quick turnaround time on the film, with a planned release in August.

PEAKS), who executive produced Almercyda's follow-up.

NADJA, shot in black and white in New York for a reported \$1.5 million, stars Elina Löwensohn (SCHINDLER'S LIST) as the title character and Jared Harris (son of Richard) as Edgar. Also featured are Suzy Amis (BLOWN AWAY) and Peter Fonda (EASY RIDER). Composer Simon Fisher Turner (CARAVAGGIO) has created the score employing the other-worldly instrument, the theremin, made famous by Bernard Hermann in DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL.

As the story goes, Edgar and Nadja are the twin vampire children of Dracula himself. When their father is staked in the beginning of the film by Van Helsing, the siblings quarrel over the immense family inheritance. Vampires, Almercyda argues, are not very different from their human counterparts. While the film has its share of action and blood-letting, the director is quick to describe the film as more of an intimate character study, with a touch of humor. "In order to have weight, you have to have something light," he reasons.

Aside from its obvious economic benefits, what attracted Almercyda to Pixelvision? "I like the look and feeling it creates," he says, adding that Pixelvision will become the visual equivalent of Vampire Vision—both unreal and hyper-real. "I wanted to create a different kind of reality in this film," says Almercyda. "Pixelvision will be used when the vampires are effected or aroused in some way."

"The horror genre is perfect for experimental formats such as Pixelvision," adds NADJA producer Mary Sweeney, who viewed dailies from Los Angeles while line producer Amy Hobby handled on-the-set duties. "NADJA is a genre-busting film. It's a very modern film, which finds its humor in its material without becoming campy."

"David [Lynch] has been incredibly supportive," says Almercyda of the avant-garde filmmaker, who also makes a cameo appearance in the film.

"Both David and I have a lot of faith in Michael," says Sweeney. "We like to help newcomers we think are good. Michael is a great writer, a very talented filmmaker."

Since the tale of Nadja and her brother unfolds in both Transylvania and New York, a number of

The Revenge of Mystery Science Theater 3000

Film version awaits greenlight.



Thanks to live performances at a convention last September, followed by a cross-country tour, MST-3K may be on its way to the big screen.

the city's locations—during the five weeks of principal photography—needed to double for Eastern Europe. About one-third of the film was shot in Pixelvision, the rest in 35mm.

"Central Park looks pretty spooky on the Upper West corner around 90th Street," says Almercyda. "It doubles nicely for Transylvania. We also went to a tunnel under the reservoir and discovered an abandoned, burned-out cancer ward that we also use for Transylvanian sites." Other locations included a townhouse on Park Avenue, where the vampires bed down.

The most difficult part of the production? "We were literally shooting 'vampire hours,'" says the director. "It inverts your natural clock and can wear you down."

While the western is Almercyda's genre of choice, he explains that there is a great deal about the horror genre he finds attractive. "In horror, you find your most basic primary emotions—an area I enjoy exploring. What's really exciting about the horror genre is that—more than any other genre—it allows filmmakers to work fast and

cheaply," says Almercyda, who cites David Cronenberg as an influence. "Cronenberg once said that he preferred the kind of horror film where the monster comes from inside." Now, with his foray into vampire films, Almercyda finds himself exploring a similar kind of horror. "Vampires have always struggled with a dual nature. Vampire conflicts are an extension of human conflicts; they tap into what's near to us. It's not easy being a vampire." □

It seems as if the eagerly awaited (by MISTies, at least) MYSTERY SCIENCE THEATER 3000 film is on its way to the big screen, thanks to several live performances last year. At September's MST-3K convention, the troupe performed their script for THIS ISLAND EARTH, then launched a cross-country tour of various college campuses, during which they skewered more conventional targets of their satiric barbs.

After having the project fall apart once before, Best Brains producer Jim Mallon is uncharacteristically cautious about the prospects for the new deal. "The negotiations are still going on; we're just hoping," is all he will say for sure at this point. "Until you get a check, you can't really say it's a go."

So, did the convention performance, attended by Universal Pictures executives, convince the studio to retract its earlier decision to back out of a deal to make THIS ISLAND EARTH into an MST-3K motion picture? "I think the live show helped teach the executives the value and potential of the movie; but to what extent, who knows?" Mallon replies, reluctant to discuss further details until contracts are signed. "It's very complicated. There's a lot I can't say right now. All will become clear once we get our green light. I'm laying low on this for now, because it's a little bit before the event." □

Dark Knight Director

continued from page 5

Schumacher informed me, when I asked him whether he was changing the tone of the series. "When you have a 34-year-old hero, it's lighter, because you have to be as old as me to be really dark and brooding. Val [Kilmer, Keaton's replacement as Batman] is a young man, so he hasn't had that many years to brood! I think there'll always be a dark edge to Batman; that's part of what makes Batman great—the fact that his parents were killed when he was young and he took on this mantle. Because he's a superhero that isn't really a superhero—an ordinary man without superpowers who becomes a vigilante wearing this suit—there will always be a haunted [element]. We've tried to deal with that, with the mythic element of Batman, his origin and childhood, and what the Bat stands for."

ROBERT BLOCH

The prolific genre author of much more than PSYCHO passes away.

Robert Bloch, who died in September of liver cancer, had been a major contributor to the horror genre for over five decades, beginning with numerous memorable short stories that appeared in *Weird Tales* and *Fantastic Adventures* from the mid-'30s through the '40s.

While he is best known as the author of *Psycho*, the basis for the classic Hitchcock film, he made numerous other significant contributions. The radio series STAY TUNED FOR TERROR was based on his work, as were many of the best episodes of the television series THRILLER and ALFRED HITCHCOCK presents. He contributed important stories to the mythos of both Lovecraft ("Strange Eons," "Mysteries of the Worm") and STAR TREK.

Many of his best novels are currently out of print, but all are entertaining and readable. His excellent book, *The Scarf*, was one of the first to be written from the point of view of a psychotic character. He was fascinated by Jack the Ripper and contributed memorable fiction spun off from the case, including the story "Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper" and the novel *Night of the Ripper*.

He began writing screenplays in 1962 with THE COUCH. His subsequent film work includes STRAIT-JACKET, THE NIGHT WALKER, THE PSYCHOPATH, THE DEADLY BEES, TORTURE GARDEN, THE HOUSE THAT DRIPPED BLOOD, and ASYLUM. As a story writer, he was so prolific that he employed several pseudonyms, including Tarleton Fiske, E.K. Jarvis, Will Folke, Wilson Kane, and John Sheldon.

In person, he was genial and affable, with a wry sense of humor. He maintained close ties to fandom throughout his life. The

Though his name was forever linked with PSYCHO, Bloch had many other fine credits: e.g. ASYLUM (below) and THE HOUSE THAT DRIPPED BLOOD (right).



joke most often said about him is that he had the heart of a child...in a jar...on his desk. His work is notable for its humor and shrewd sense of psychology. While he is explicit at times in his written fiction, he eschewed gore in his film work. He was a sure craftsman whose legacy is a series of clever and horrific character studies that will remain high-points in the annals of fantasy and horror.

Dennis Fischer

TALES FROM THE HOOD

The old horror anthology format moves into a new urban setting.

By Steve Biodrowski

Sometimes, it seems as if the contemporary horror film doesn't know what to do with itself. After all, castles and European legends might have scared us once upon a time, but it's hard for those make-believe terrors to compete with the real life horrors of today. The solution proposed by TALES FROM THE HOOD is to infuse the traditional genre format with the contemporary violence and brutality of urban black melo-

Clarence Williams III (TWIN PEAKS) stars as Mr. Simon, a mortician who tells some horrifying tales.



dramas like BOYZ IN THE HOOD. In fact, the press releases are fond of referring to TALES as "the first urban, anthological, action-horror film."

Appropriately, producer Darin Scott has experience in both areas, having previously produced THE OFFSPRING (1987) and MENACE II SOCIETY (1993). The film marks something of a change of pace, on the other hand, for director and co-writer Rusty Cundieff (FEAR OF A BLACK HAT), who co-wrote the script with Scott. The photography is by Nicholas Roeg's longtime d.p. Tony Richmond, whose career stretches all the way back to the golden era of Hammer Horror. Kenneth Hall supervises the makeup and special effects, which feature contributions from KNB FX and Screaming Mad George. The executive producer is Spike Lee. Savoy Pictures plans a May 5 release.

Clarence Williams III stars in the wrap-around, as Mr. Simon, the sinister and malevolent undertaker, whose violent and terrifying tales to a trio of young hustlers form the basis of the film. The brothers show up at the funeral parlor to retrieve what they think is a lost stash of drugs; instead they get a nightmarish tour of a supernatural underworld, where they discover the cold truth about dealing in darkness. Also in the cast are Rosalind Cash, Corbin Bernsen (L.A. LAW, STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION's "Q-2" episode) and perennial exploitation psycho-star Wings Hauser (VICE SQUAD, WATCHERS 3), as a racist cop whose innocent black victim takes revenge from beyond the grave.

The project grew out of Scott and Cundieff's mutual interest in the horror genre. "I had done a play called *The Black Horror Show*, and I was working on a vampire flick," recalls the director.

"The play was a socially conscious urban horror piece; the film was similar. Darin had seen the play, and I had been talking to him about the film and saying I wanted to figure out how to get this stuff off the ground."

At Scott's suggestion, the vampire project was set aside in favor of a multi-story format. "I had done a horror anthology for my first movie [OFFSPRING]," the producer elaborates. "I'm a big fan of Amicus films, and I always wanted to come back to that form and do it in a fresh way."

As the title implies, TALES FROM THE HOOD will be more "serious and contemporary" (per Cundieff) than Amicus efforts like ASYLUM and DR. TERROR'S HOUSE OF HORRORS. Adds Scott, "It's more socially aware than it is urban. None of it really takes place in the inner city. It deals with issues that people in the city would be concerned with. I generally say that the horror in the movie comes more out of the reality of the situation and the people than the more fantastic elements

Rusty Cundieff (left) directs and Darin Scott (right) produces TALES FROM THE HOOD for Savoy.





Above: Surrealistic effects specialist Screaming Mad George prepares Williams in a Devil makeup a la Rick Baker's work in *LEGEND*.

of the monsters and the supernatural. The scary stuff is the real stuff—the way people abuse people. Monsters don't generally abuse you."

Despite the similarity of titles, *TALES FROM THE HOOD* will not be adopting the campy tone of HBO's *TALES FROM THE CRYPT*. (To be fair, one should mention that, except for the Crypt Keeper sequences, *DEMON KNIGHT* pretty much abandoned that approach as well.) Says Cundieff, "The wraparound story has a little bit of camp to it, but I would say the individual stories don't." Adds Scott, "It's more back to the Amicus, straight-ahead approach, instead of making fun of it, which has been the flavor lately."

Tony Richmond can speak with some authority on traditional versus contemporary approaches to horror, having started as an assistant on *THE GORGON* (1964), Hammer Films' last teaming of director Terence Fisher with stars Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing. "The Hammer movies had this sort of romance to them," says the cinematographer. "They were actually fairy tales, and there was not too much realism about them. They were cult pictures, but they were really wonderful; even though they were made very cheaply and quickly, they took great care."

TALES, on the other hand, "is very real—it has a lot of wonderful messages to it." The socially conscious realism required a "pretty low-key" approach from him. "It's not too Gothic, because the place is not Gothic," Richmond explains, gesturing by way of illustration to the surrounding Inglewood Park Cemetery loca-

tion. "It would be ridiculous doing Gothic when there's palm trees around. And now I'm using almost no light out here. You could not do that in those days. You could do night shots, but when I was assistant cameraman on *DR. ZHIVAGO*, you had one or two nights just to light one shot. But here, we're lighting in a graveyard, and faster film stocks have really helped."

Despite the overall consistency of approach, Richmond insists that each individual episode dictates its own style; in

fact, the production was like making four mini-movies. Says Scott, "This is the second thing I've done in this format, and it's fun, because I get to bring in a new cast, over and over, a whole new group of people to star."

Of course, the multiple story format has its perils, most notably in the pacing, because the storytelling momentum must keep restarting from scratch. This is especially noticeable in the last reel, when an audience would normally be expecting to launch into the third act full throttle, not start another episode. Scott hopes the wraparound story will fulfill this function. "The connecting device actually does what a regular movies does: provide a start, then build up steam," he says. "This is a pretty strong story itself, and the end of it is pretty spectacular, so we get the big finish from that, rather than trying to get the big finish from one of the others." □

Typical of the film's fusion of traditional horror motifs with urban settings, Anthony Griffith, in makeup by KNB FX, plays a zombie who returns from the grave to avenge himself against a racist cop.



ULTRAMAN: THE



Battling to protect the city, Ultraman holds aloft Teresdon, a subterranean creature that can come above ground only at night.

ULTIMATE HERO

Japan's biggest hero comes to America in a remake of the original series.

By Dennis Fischer

Fans of Asian creature features should soon be having a blast, watching the carefully crafted and improved recreation of their favorite television superhero, ULTRAMAN. A silent silver-and-red being notable for his ability to bash monsters threatening Earth, the character has appeared in seven series, including a previous English-language version shot in Australia, but this is his first American venture.

Just who or what is Ultraman? Robot, cyborg, or some kind of inter-galactic cop in a strange uniform? According to Juliet Avola, the show's American producer, "He's an alien entity who enters into a human being and, in times of duress, becomes Ultraman. The humans call on Ultraman, and he gets really big to beat the monsters."

Kane Kosugi plays Kenichi Kai, Ultraman's alter ego and member of Worldwide Investigative Network Response, which also includes communications operator Theresa Beck (Sandra Guibord), Captain Russell Edlund (Harrison Page), attack fighter pilot Carolyn Fontaine (Robyn Bliley), and *Hawk* gunner Eric Sanders (Rob Roy Fitzgerald). The female parts have been beefed up from the original series, in addition to featuring a younger and more multiethnic cast.

"The supporting cast is really good," says series director King Wilder, who helmed the 13 installments, all remakes of episodes from the original show. "It ranges from faces you would recognize to some



King Wilder on location for the new series. The director took advantage of the good Southern California weather to shoot all the monster battles outdoors.

new talent that nobody would know. Bill Mummy is in one of the episodes. Harrison Page, the captain of the team, was an Emmy nominee for a QUANTUM LEAP episode."

Unlike previous incarnations, this new ULTRAMAN stays true to the original series. Also, instead of being shot in the controlled environment of a studio, Wilder elected to take advantage of California's generally clear weather and shoot all the monster battles outdoors in natural sunlight. Wilder feels that his use of actual locations helps sell the suspension of disbelief to the audience. "Whether it is a nuclear power plant or an oil refinery, we go to a location that has an industrial look to it," he explains. "We went to the Raleigh Generating Plant in Pacoima, and it served well as

both locations. For a lot of the exteriors, we went to a lot of locations that had the best look for the shot it was intended for. We had a lot of things like real helicopters flying in the shots and going back and forth in order to sell it. We had a Hummer as the team vehicle that we leased for the show, and that boosted production value."

The production team which, in addition to Avola and Wilder, includes production designer Aaron Osborne, special effects supervisor Joe Viskocil, and monster-maker Kevin Hudson, had nine weeks of preproduction to make all the monsters, miniatures, and Ultraman suits, and plan what Wilder was going to shoot over a period of 14 weeks.

Wilder's biggest production headache was shooting out of continuity "because we didn't

have enough money to keep stages to shoot the entire 13 episodes in order," he says. "All similar locations—such as the command center, which appears in every episode, like the bridge of the *Enterprise*—we would shoot all at once. In about a two- or three-week period, we shot the command center scenes for all 13. Then we moved on to the other sets, such as the MTC Bridge, which is this flying aircraft carrier that the WINR team has. Then we shot all the *Hawk* cockpit scenes, which are these little fighter jets like F-16s. From there, we just had miscellaneous swing sets: board rooms, apartments. We bounced around between 30 and 40 sets in a matter of weeks.

"We had five weeks on-stage, about three weeks of location stuff, and about three and a half weeks of monsters," Wilder continues. "We're trying to get a full episode's worth of live action and monster stuff in the equivalent of shooting it in one week, six days, which is a hustle. Logistics-wise, it was a headache, trying to maintain screen direction for 17 monsters, Ultraman, and live actors, all being shot at different times, sometimes months apart. I keep notes in my own scripts: screen direction, which way people are running, which way people are looking toward monsters, and that kind of thing. I always refer to the script supervisor's notes, and we also take Polaroids to show that in this scene, at this point in time, this character is looking in this direction. There are notes everywhere in order to

maintain where we are in a certain episode at a certain time. It's a big job, but so far things are cutting together."

The series employs no stop motion or computer graphics, relying instead on men in suits. It holds the same tradition that the original ULTRAMAN had, just with more of an updated look because technology since the '60s has advanced. The Ultraman costume and the colorful monsters from the original series were recreated by a talented team under the direction of Kevin Hudson, which includes Robert Armstrong, Wes C. Cafer, David Calvillo, James Fusterman, Bruce Spaulding-Fuller, Marc Scott Goodell, Terri Hardin, Todd Heindel, Lynette Johnson, Eric Yeager and others.

"Kevin has done a great job with the monsters and Ultraman suit," Wilder enthuses. "We have a great pyro guy, Joe Viskocil, who's done the STAR WARS and TERMINATOR movies, so we have great special effects. Pretty much everybody's into it because a lot of them are fans and they just wanted to work on this. They took a rate cut in order to do it because we didn't have the money, so we've been pretty lucky as far as getting good talent on this show. Kevin and his crew have done everything from the Predator suit to the Batman suit to ADAMS FAMILY. But again, as I say, they're all squids. They're really into Ultraman and they have these Ultraman figures on their benches at work where they do their sculpting."

The enthusiasm was necessary in order to achieve results with limited resources. "We were told originally that there was going to be one monster per episode, which would have been 13," recounts Wilder. "When we met with the Japanese, they showed us 17 monsters. That adds up to more than one per episode. We had to quickly figure out if we could afford that. We played around with our budget a little bit and figured we could."

Considering that Ultraman and the monsters he fights are supposed to be 150 feet tall, it takes some ingenuity to make that credible. "We overcrank

"The Ultraman design was a big question," says Spaulding-Fuller. "Ultimately, we settled on a foam-fabricated suit. You don't get big wrinkles like with a wet suit."



Bruce Spaulding-Fuller, one of Kevin Hudson's effects team, poses with one of the new monster suits, adapted and improved from the old series.

the camera in order to slow them down," says Wilder, "and have the monsters move in a certain way. We have a lot of miniature sets that we have them fight in and destroy. A lot of times I'll use anything from a 14mm to 75mm [lens] depending on the shot. What sells the fact that he's big is his relationship to the miniatures and/or the foreground material. If I'm playing with him somewhere in the distance and I have a bunch of trees or houses in the foreground, then it makes him look gigantic, and I don't have to use a wide angle lens for that. So it's camera tricks."

The fight scenes on the new ULTRAMAN will be different. Says Wilder, "I'm trying to stay away from some of the ways they fought in the original ULTRAMAN series for a couple reasons. One, the suits can't take a lot of the judo-type moves, the rolling and the flipping, that the other suits took. These suits are maybe a little more fragile, because they look so good, and a certain throw or fall would probably rip

them apart, and then there'd be a lot of down time to fix it. I tried to choreograph [fights] so there wouldn't be that down time. Also I wanted to put a little more logic into the way a 100-foot-tall superhero might fight a 100-foot-tall monster. Instead of punching his lights out, I might have him do palm hits or have him wrestle around a little bit and then throw him—something that would be a little different than what two guys in a boxing rink or two guys in a wrestling match would do.

"I'm still trying to make the battles as exciting and as entertaining as I can. That definitely is a challenge. When two monsters fight together, it's an easy thing [if] they just flail at each other, because monsters don't have to do anything coordinated. When you have a humanoid figure fighting a monster, then you have to change the battle a little bit so that it doesn't look silly. That's been a big challenge."

The wear and tear on the Ultraman suit became another

challenge. "Ultraman takes the most beating, obviously, because he's in every episode," Avola explains. "The other monsters are only in one episode, so they seem not to fall apart until the very end. And of course if they have a huge death scene, we don't shoot that until after we've shot the rest of the episode."

"Ultraman was a big question for a long time," says Bruce Spaulding-Fuller, one of the head people on Hudson's team. "Kevin's initial idea was to do it like the BATMAN costume—he'd worked on BATMAN RETURNS—which was a Spandex suit with foam pieces on it like armor. The Japanese did not like that, and they did not want to go with a straight Spandex suit, as in the Australian series. They apparently don't care for that too much. We did not want to go with a wetsuit, which is what they traditionally do. Ultimately, we settled on a complete sculpted, foam-fabricated suit. It wrinkles really well. You don't have those big buckles in it like scuba gear has, but that came late in the game, so Ultraman was pounded out pretty quickly. We had about four or five sculptors on the body suit. We didn't have a clear design at first, how far we could take it away from the old Ultraman or what little additions we could do. Eventually, it was decided we could make him a little more angular by carving some actual musculature into his body in a sort of geometric kind of design."

The Ultra-suit's helmet and chest timer are more elaborate than in the old show. The timer, along with Ultraman's eyes, reads blue when he's in full power phase; but when he loses power after three minutes in Earth's atmosphere (the character's Achilles heel), the color changes to red. The eyes and the timer had to be rigged to change color; plus, the timer contained eight green LEDs that flashed in a circular pattern within the little dome. Of course, the electronics are a potential danger, given how much an actor-stuntman perishes in the suits.

Scott Rogers, the man in the Ultraman suit, describes

the experience as "a blast, a lot of fun. It's not every day you get to be a superhero. I used to watch the show as a kid, so it's kind of a kick in the pants to play something you used to see. It's not Superman or Spiderman, but it's just as fun."

Rogers has a stunt background, "a lot of general experience in acrobatic stuff and a lot of experience with some of the stunt equipment." That experience comes in handy, as when Ultraman flies—not with wires or mattes, but the old-fashioned way—propelled by air ramps and something called the Leavittator (designed by Lane Leavit) which actually flings Ultraman either vertically or horizontally through the air. With enough shots, the editor can hook them together to create the illusion of continuous flight.

"It's great for using on the show," says Rogers, "because it doesn't require wires, and it really looks like somebody is flying. It's a device where you stand on it and it'll throw you straight up in the air. It takes quite a bit of experience, and there is a lot of timing involved, because it can really send your legs up into your hips if you don't hit it right. I can get my hands up to about 18 feet in the air if I really want to, but that's really dangerous."

Rogers claims to have survived the effects ordeal relatively painlessly. "I trained for it. I wore sweats when I worked out, to get used to sweating, because I'll exude a gallon to a gallon and a half a day. It just comes right through me, completely soaking the suit. By the end of the day, the suit can weigh up to 30 pounds, which tends to make things a little more difficult. We tried to do all the real stunt stuff, the flying or anything like that, early in the day so that I'm fresh and the suit is light."

Perhaps conscious of parental concerns over violence in the somewhat derivative MIGHTY MORPHIN POWER RANGERS show, Rogers explains why he thinks his character is a good role model. "Ultraman, in my opinion, is different in that he's not vicious. He's just trying to subdue or control the monsters or enemy

ULTRA-ASIAN ACTION HEROES

ULTRAMAN is only one of many Oriental adaptations being produced in America.

*By Steve Biodrowski
and Michael Beeler*

Across the barren wasteland of a post-apocalyptic world, a cold and savage wind blows unceasingly against the ravaged remains of humanity. Void of freedom, trust, or hope, the remnants of mankind succumb like cattle to the evil lords of this place beyond history. No longer are there governments, religions, treaties, or partnerships. There is only complete obedience or death.

This is the setting of FIST OF THE NORTH STAR, one of a slew of American productions derived from Asian sources, in this case Tesuo Hara's popular Japanese *manga* series, which also served as the basis of the anime epic released by Streamline Pictures three years ago [see page 32]. Also in the works: a live-action version of CRYING FREEMAN, produced by Brian Yuzna; a feature film of MIGHTY MORPHIN' POWER RANGERS, from Saban Entertainment; an Americanized Godzilla from TriStar; and SLAYER, THE DEVIL'S ASSASSIN, the American debut of Hong Kong director Ronnie Yu.

The live-action FIST OF THE NORTH STAR tells the story of Kenshiro (Gary Daniels) and his legendary battle against the forces of evil. Also starring is Malcolm McDowell, as Kenshiro's assassinated father, whose spiritual guidance



THE MIGHTY MORPHIN' POWER RANGERS, cannibalized from Japan's ZYU RANGER television show, gets the big screen Hollywood treatment this year.

leads the superhuman warrior to the destiny he must fulfill. The \$5 million production, filmed in 30 days, is a joint venture of the Japanese and Americans, produced by First Look Pictures in association with Ozla Pictures.

Director Tony Randel (TICKS), who co-wrote the script with Peter Aitkins (HELLRAISER 2, 3, & 4), compares this film to the in-studio approach of his directorial debut, HELLBOUND: HELLRAISER II. "Everything after that was mostly practical location," he says. "This is more like [HELLBOUND], because we're creating our own environment. We're shooting exteriors on a sound stage in Los Angeles, so it's going to be a much more expressionistic movie."

Though also adapted from a Japanese *manga*, CRYING FREEMAN is no post-apocalyptic fantasy but a gadget-strewn James Bondish thriller, by way of THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE, with mystical overtones thrown in for good measure. Christophe Gans had signed with Brian Yuzna to write the script before directing "The Drowned," his episode of the Yuzna-produced trilogy NECRONOMICON. "They liked my dailies—the way I moved the camera and the way I worked with actors, so they offered me the opportunity to direct CRYING FREEMAN immediately afterward," he relates. "It's a pretty big movie with a bigger budget [\$9 million] and stars. I think it will be a different kind of movie. It's



TriStar's Godzilla remains in hibernation since the departure of Jan DeBont, but Toho continues the series with *GODZILLA VS. SPACE GODZILLA* (above).

“I think it will be a different kind of movie,” says Cristophe Gans of *CRYING FREEMAN*, based on the Japanese *manga*. “It will be my tribute to John Woo.”

a love story between a specialist assassin and the daughter of a Japanese prosecutor, based on the famous Japanese comic book. It will be my tribute to one of my favorite directors, John Woo. We can't copy John Woo—that would be impossible—but I think there is the same mood, a kind of gunfight, mobster melodrama. I hope it will harken back to the melodrama of Hollywood in the '30s and '40s.”

The feature version of *POWER RANGERS* completed principal photography earlier this year (in Australia!). Other Oriental adaptations are not so far along. TriStar's much anticipated *GODZILLA*, wittily announced in 1993 with a two-page ad in the Hollywood trade papers (of a looming reptilian shadow falling over the TriStar building) is in limbo at the moment, after seeming to be a definite greenlight last year.

The script is by Terry Rossio and Ted Elliot, who wrote *THE PUPPETMASTERS*, so maybe we shouldn't raise our hopes too high. The setting was moved to the Northwestern United States, so that the prehistoric beast could chew some new scenery for a change. (Can't you just

imagine that radioactive breath torching the Space Needle in Seattle, Washington?) Godzilla is recast as a sort of cosmic watchdog, left in hibernation in order to save Earth from alien threats—in this case an original monster named Gryphon. (Toho Studios wanted too much money for Ghidrah, Godzilla's outer space nemesis in the Japanese series). However, when the Big G is awakened prematurely by radioactive waste, he turns his unused destructive capacity on Earth itself.

A number of directors'

Director Tony Randel has transformed the anime splattertoon *FIST OF THE NORTH STAR* into a live-action American film starring Gary Daniels (below).



names had been bandied about, including such quirky talents as Tim Burton and Terry Gilliam, before former cinematographer Jan DeBont (*DIE HARD*) was signed hot off the success of his directorial debut, *SPEED*. In *Daily Variety*, DeBont, eager to erase the man-in-a-suit image, promised “totally new effects, more complex than *JURASSIC PARK*.” Stan Winston's CGI company, Digital Domain, had begun designing a new Godzilla, which had to be approved by Toho, and DeBont had begun shooting location work for background plates, when the deal fell apart over budget disputes.

Originally, TriStar had announced that the sky was the limit, in terms of exceeding audience expectations, but the ceiling turned out to be a more prosaic \$100 million. When TriStar balked at an additional \$30 million, DeBont left the project in December. Planned commencement of principal photography in spring was put on hold while talks began with other potential helmers. The disputed \$30 million apparently regarded r&d on how to destroy buildings in CGI, something *JURASSIC PARK* never had to deal with. The current script has

Godzilla passing out on the Golden Gate bridge *before* reaching San Francisco, in order to cut costs, an anti-climax guaranteed to infuriate audiences. Budget-saving options under consideration include, believe it or not, a man in a suit.

SLAYER, THE DEVIL'S ASSASSIN, from director Ronnie Yu, whose *THE BRIDE WITH WHITE HAIR* took first prize at France's Fantastica Film Festival, is also on hold, after a planned June 1994 start date. Since John Woo's American debut didn't win him the accolades of his Hong Kong work, we might have reason to quell our anticipation, but *HARD TARGET* suffered from studio interference. Yu will be filming on an independent budget for August Entertainment, with his cinematographer from *BRIDE WITH WHITE HAIR*, Peter Pau. And the fine script is by Ethan Reiff, Cyrus Voris, and Mark Bishop, whose work on *DEMON KNIGHT* brought *TALES FROM THE CRYPT* to the big screen with far more dramatic success than one would have expected, abandoning grisly humor and revenge melodrama in favor of some solid mythologizing.

Mark Dacascos, star of August's *CRYING FREEMAN*, is set to play the title character, an ageless assassin, who acts as one of the Devil's enforcers on Earth in exchange for not having his own Satanic contract called in. Like Freeman, Hannibal Skaras falls for a female target and decides to protect instead of kill her, putting himself “on top of the worst shit list there is,” as his older and more experienced colleague is sent to track him down. Since *DOUBLE DRAGON* hardly launched Dacascos' star, the producers are probably waiting to see whether *FREEMAN* makes him a good investment to carry a film. □



Ultraman battles at least one monster per week and sometimes more, including the female Red King (above) and the nuclear-gobbling Gabora (inset).

or whatever you want to call them. He doesn't really try to kill them but gives them a chance. Some keep coming at him, and he's forced to kill them, but others he can overpower and do away with them by other means. He is tough but compassionate—a real '90s kind of superhero. He actually saves one monster. There's a male and a female Red King; when the female dies on her own, falling off a cliff, the male tries to jump after her, and Ultraman pulls him

back. The monster has no fight in him, because he's just lost his mate, and Ultraman just lets him go off on his own."

Wilder promises that the series will maintain a sense of adventure and fun. "I try to do as much as I can under the constraints. There are a lot of quick cuts, primarily because of the sense of pace that I want in certain scenes; of course, other scenes are going to be slower. We have a lot of dolly shots, overhead shots, moving shots in cars, and rac-

ing around and running. We pretty much ran the gamut in this thing."

As far as differences from the original, Wilder feels, "We were given a good amount of leeway in what we could do in the stories. We were given Japanese stories that were translated into English, and the translations, as they say, lost a little bit. So we took the nut of the story and gave it to a bunch of writers to adapt into standard, Hollywood half-hour format—23 pages. They would take the story from A to B and put in whatever they could as far as adventure with that monster and with that locale they were given in the original story, and then we would have to trim it down depending on the scope of their script compared to our budget.

"We did have an extensive 22-hour script meeting with the Japanese on all 13 episodes, and we did go through a number of changes, but they weren't anything major," Wilder elaborates. "It was primarily an explanation of why certain characters say this as opposed to that because it didn't translate, or why characters did this

because we didn't understand it from their story, so we would change it. When they read our first drafts of the adaptations, they pretty much had an OK on that, and they just wanted to tweak a few little things, so we were able to do pretty much what we wanted.

"They gave us latitude pretty much because they didn't know anything about geography over here in America," Wilder adds. "They couldn't write certain things that we may not have access to here geographically, so they made generalities about what they imagine America would be like, and we would make adjustments accordingly, as to what we could actually come up with. We couldn't go to Yellowstone or Mt. Rushmore or the Space Needle in Seattle, so there were certain things we couldn't do."

Wilder sings high praise for what his production team has managed to achieve by relying on old-fashioned methods in this day of high-tech CGI: "Our production designer, Aaron Osborne, just did an awesome job on our sets, especially for the amount of money we gave

The members of the Worldwide Investigative Network Response Team (known as WINR for short) examine an extraterrestrial artifact.





Above: Ultraman faces the new version of Gomora, a dinosaur-like creature who thaws out after a deep freeze. Below: Kane Kosugi plays Kenichi Kai, Ultraman's alter ego.



him, which was a pittance. He had a lot of connections so he was able to get sets that looked great for very little money. Kevin [Hudson] worked really well on making good monster suits and Ultraman suits, and he got good talent who wanted to come on the show. Scott Rogers has done a really good job because I had worked with him for a little while. I told him I wanted to have Ultraman move as much in a comic book way as possible, sort of like the way Spiderman might move."

Wilder thinks that Ultraman's body movements help give the mute superhero some personality. "You can see that in his movements," he says. "Whenever I need something specific from Scott, I tell him, 'I need this and this and this. You're tired, and you've been through a lot, so you have to move a certain way.' And he

pulls it off. And that is the hard part, because there is no expression on Ultraman's face; you have to feel whatever his expression would be in his body movement."

"The director really wants the comic book look," Rogers agrees, "so you always have to think about where each hand, each finger, and your legs are positioned. You have to be aware of your whole body."

Wilder wants his series to have the feeling of the old serials. Not camp, but a certain style wherein the characters seem both real and, in a way, a little bit unreal. He hopes to maintain a sense of adventure throughout, because this show is geared for kids—there's a lot of action but no blood. Whenever a monster dies, he usually explodes in a shower of sparks, a combination of pyro and opticals in which he will more or less just fade away

and disappear. There won't be body parts flying all over the place, so it won't be too horrendous for kids to watch, and parents should not feel afraid of letting them watch it (unless they're already sick of their kids watching POWER RANGERS six days a week).

"So far in the footage that I've seen, it reads," Wilder concludes. "Scott's really good at getting into comic book style action poses, which I've been trying to maintain in order to give a little bit of a different feel, because the original Japanese series had him hunched over a little bit more in his poses. He dodged a little bit more and flipped and threw the monsters around. In this one, I have him more the way that Superman or Spiderman might be: big, over-the-top sometimes, but for his character it looks good. He's [literally] a larger-than-life superhero." □

ULTRAMAN: THE ORIGINAL

An appreciation of the show that started it all.

By Jeff Smith

In his native Japan he is known as Urutoraman, "King of the Heroes," and he is as much a cultural icon there as a certain Man of Steel is here. Introduced in a tacky half-hour adventure series in the mid-'60s, his popularity endures today, almost 30 years later.

Created by Eiji Tsuburaya, the special effects wizard for most of Inoshiro Honda's GODZILLA movies, ULTRAMAN was based in part on ULTRA-Q, an earlier black-and-white TV series about an elite group of scientists who combat giant monsters on Earth. ULTRAMAN took the basic premise and added a bizarre-looking alien superhero to the mix. The show premiered in Japan in July of 1966, and ran until April of '67, a total of 39 episodes.

The first episode's set up is simple: while chasing the radioactive monster Bemular through space, Ultraman—a

Below: in the original series, Hayata wields the beta capsule that will transform him into Ultraman, seen at right in the classic "beam" pose.



sort of intergalactic cop—enters Earth's atmosphere and accidentally collides with a Science Patrol airship; the ship crashes and the pilot, Hyata (Susuma Kurobe), is killed. In regret for this tragedy, Ultraman gives Hyata his own life, merging the two as one being, and gives him the "Beta Capsule," with which he can affect the transformation from mild-mannered Science Patrol grunt into giant-sized superhero.

To kids weaned on DC and Marvel Comics, Ultraman was an intriguingly different superhero. It was never made clear whether his silver-and-red appearance was supposed to be a uniform or his actual skin. If the former is true, we are never given any indication what might lurk beneath. There was an attempt to give the suit a



Above: Ultraman battles the original version of Gomora in the 1966 series. Right: Ultraman and another of his many 1966 opponents, Zambora.



uniform look (despite the obvious zipper running up the back), adding to the alien quality of the character.

His most intriguing aspect, however, was his silence. Although Ultraman clearly is an intelligent being, he speaks only three times over the course of the 39 episodes; the fact that he doesn't communicate adds to the sense that he is more than just a giant human in a weird suit.

The creators offset the character's seeming invincibility by giving him a built-in weakness: Ultraman gets energy from the sun, which rapidly diminishes in Earth's atmosphere. A light built into his chest blinks when

his energy is low, warning him that he must replenish himself or die. Although this serves as a convenient dramatic device, it also tends to limit Ultraman's screen time, and the series is always more exciting when he's out there fighting rubber giants.

Another large part of the success of the series is that the characters are extremely likable. Granted ULTRAMAN was never intended as high drama, but attempts were made to give the characters an emotional core and make them as real as possible within the confines of an action series.

The special effects were on par for Japanese product of the time—which is to say, pretty dismal. The monster suits, though often of imaginative design, were usually ill-fitting, with sagging skins and glassy eyes. Some of the monsters—the Baltans, Mefilas, and Gahora, to name a few—work beautifully, but the majority have that sort of threadbare look often associated with Japanese monster movies. The model work is fairly good (the miniatures are rather obvi-

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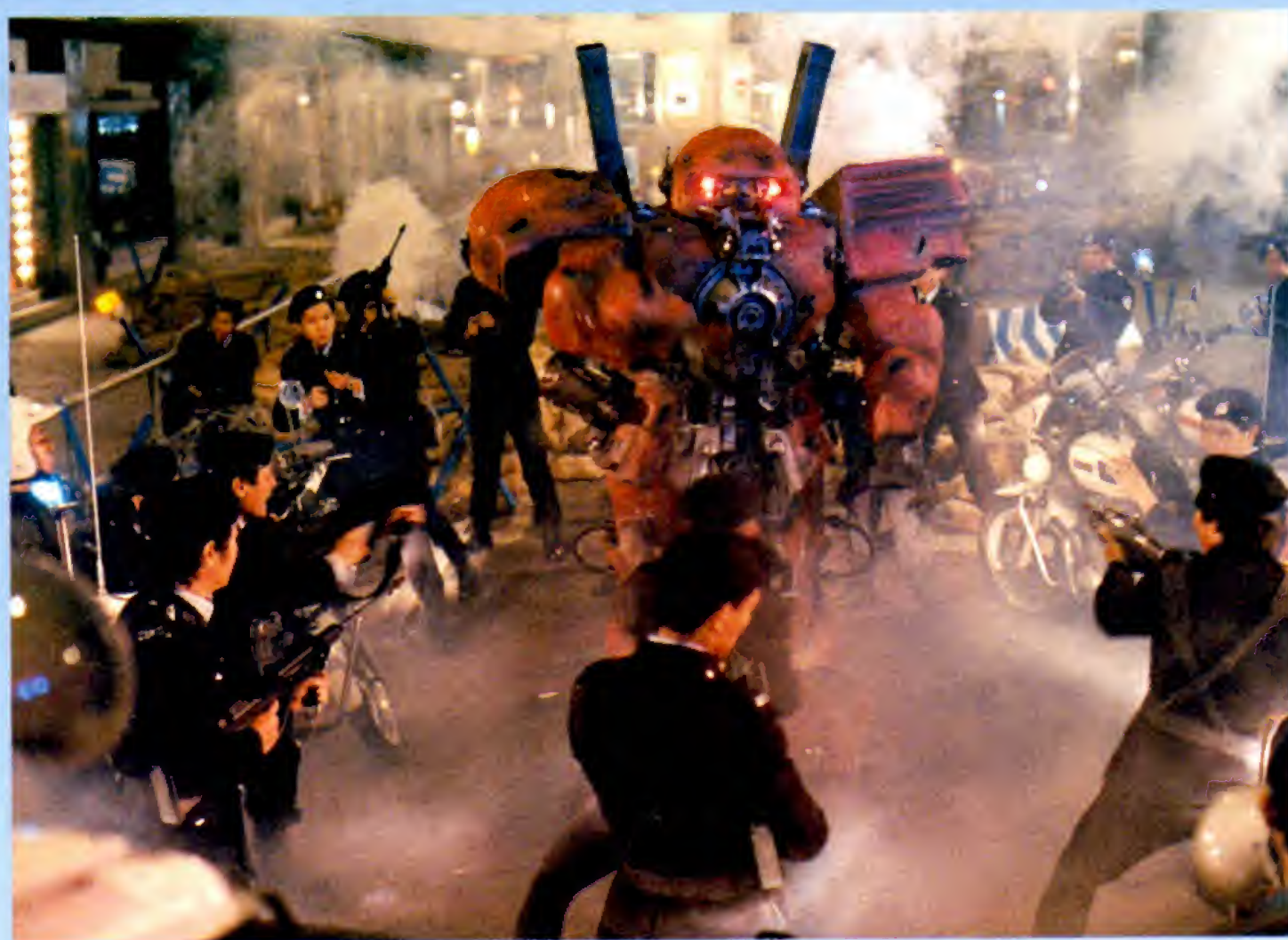


By Dr. Craig D. Reid

Rocketing into the air, our hero whirligigs toward the gnashing museum-piece T-Rex that slothingly awakens. Legs in a full split, he mounts the dinosaur's neck and rides it like a bucking bronco. Next, he battles a seductive Hell Virgin who changes into an insect-like apparition that snarlingly devours mortal men. Then he challenges her fireball-shooting daughter and fights a giant horned devil. Golden Harvest's PEACOCK KING (1988), featuring Yuen Biao, is one of the typical new wave horror-fantasy films making Hong Kong the world's most movie-mad city.

The strength of this postage stamp colony's film industry is intertwined with its historical roots in superstition, extraordinarily translated into film via martial arts action. American film, even with its superior budgets and technology, is dwarfed by the frenetic-paced ghost thrillers of Tsui Hark, the rapid-fire pugilistic marvels of Ching Siu Tung, and the creative athleticism of childhood Chinese opera brothers Jackie Chan, Yuen Biao, and others.

At the center of Hong Kong's movie metamorphosis is the shrewd founder of Golden Harvest, Raymond Chow. In 1970, he received one million U.S. dollars from a friend, left Shaw Brothers, and started GH. Chow never used the money but returned



Top of Page: THE BRIDE WITH WHITE HAIR is one of the most colorful and romantic fantasy films from Hong Kong—or anywhere else—this year.

Above: Fant-Asia filmmakers love to combine science fiction with action as in ROBOFORCE. **Lower right:** An angry ghost in A CHINESE GHOST STORY, the film that awakened many Western audiences to the Hong Kong output. **Below:** GREEN SNAKE features fanciful flying action mixed with mysticism, typical of Hong Kong cinema.



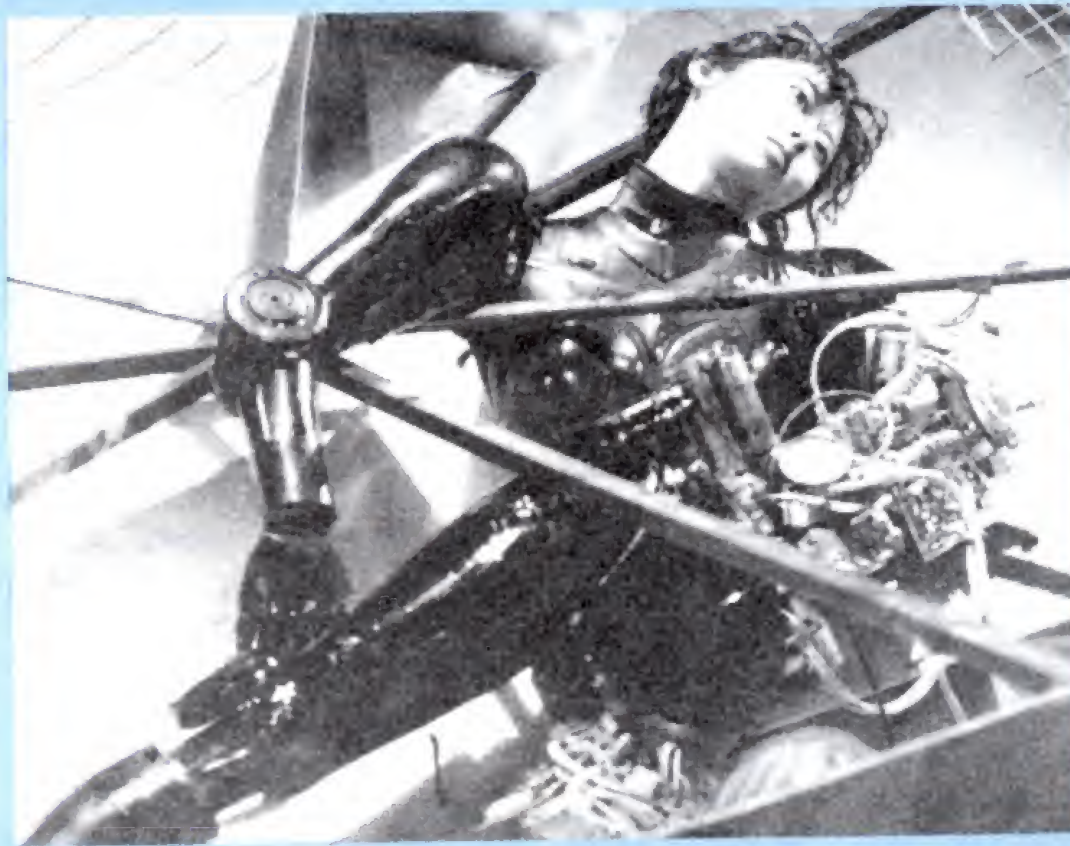
FANT-ASIA FILMS

Looking for something different in the genre? Look no farther than the Far East.

it with interest, and by 1986-87 GH had "exorcised" its expansive influence over the "Fant-Asia" film market by becoming a partial owner of other major film companies such as Cinema City, Golden Princess, Bo Ho Films, and Paragon Films. Most of the films described herein have felt the haunting hold of Chow's hand. Apart from discovering Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan, and turning some Mutant Ninja Turtles into a film franchise, Chow broke the kung-fu routine by investing in a landmark horror-fantasy that changed the Asian film industry.

Chow was convinced by Tsui Hark [see sidebar, page 21] to fund his 1983 overnight classic ZU, WARRIOR FROM THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN. The film is a bona fide roller coaster ride of demonic and magical images, seasoned with far-out special effects, and smattered with the bewitchingly choreographed action fights of Ching Siu Tung.

Regarding classic horror in the United States, we imagine actors like Lugosi, Karloff, and Chaney conjuring a menagerie of creatures who terrorize villages of non-believers, where the skeptic is the first to bite the dust. In Hong Kong, however, where ghosts, gods, and superstitions are a way of life, audiences identify with Taoist and Buddhist priest characters who boldly and unselfishly use their knowledge of exorcism and martial arts to battle things that go not "bump" but "hop" in



Unabashedly melodramatic, Fant-Asia milks its action for emotional response, as when the robot Maria apparently sacrifices herself in ROBOFORCE.

the night. Names such as Samo Hung, Lam Ching Ying, and Wu Ma have all developed their ghost-busting abilities, often as both actors and directors, through a series of films featuring the ubiquitous Manchurian hopping vampires.

Unlike the pale-faced, bat-behaved bloodsuckers from Transylvania, the Chinese vampire, dressed in Ching Dynasty garb, has a greenish-white face, yellow fangs, and long nails; instead of walking, it hops around, arms outstretched, like a sleepwalking kangaroo. According to Chinese legend, if the grave soil is too dry and the body doesn't absorb moisture, then the sun and moon spirits will dry out a corpse and turn it into a vampire. As for the hopping, popu-

lar myth explains that sometimes the corpses have their ankles pierced by an iron bar or their bodies are so stiff that they are forced to bounce after their victims. Body rigid, they can't bend over to suck one's blood, so they levitate, then float down to kill their prey by biting the neck (no sucking).

The fun of this genre revolves around the numerous ways to destroy these creatures. In GH's four-film MR. VAMPIRE series, Taoist priests, played by Lam Ching Ying, Wu Ma, or Xu Guan Yin, illustrate Eastern variations on Christian crucifixes, holy water, and stakes. Holding one's breath renders one invisible to these horrific hoppers, during which time you can whip out a handful of cooked long-grain rice or

rice wine to repel them, burn their flesh, and pin them in a coffin; or when worked into a paste, the rice can be used to cure vampire bites. Other weapons include: special eggs to blind them, red string to initiate shock treatments, shooting sunbeams from an octagonal-shaped amulet sporting I-Ching diagrams, traditional Chinese coins, wooden swords, giant gold swords, and the ever-present hand bell which can control weaker vampires' movements. However, the ultimate weapon is to have a Taoist priest hold yellow strips of paper inscribed with magical mantras between the outstretched fingers of his right hand, wave that hand in the air, and then, while muttering special incantations, apply the strip to the vampire's forehead.

Other examples of wacky ways to vanquish these voracious vaulting vampires: in DEMON KILLER, a lightning-invoking, impish woman elicits the aid of cute vampire children. In SPOOKY FAMILY, Wu Ma battles a swollen-faced vampire by spreading his own blood onto his weapons while Keng Cheng shoots magic orange-glowing rope from his "hulu" (a hollow container shaped like a headless snowman, which taoists use to carry their magic elixirs) to bind and gag the spunky spooks. In Part 4 of the HAPPY GHOST series, a "good-guy" happy hopper conjures up a cartoonized version of the legendary tiger-killing hero of China, Wu Sung,

to destroy an evil time-traveling vampire in a Hong Kong apartment. **THE LAST VAMPIRE** demonstrates how good vampires, safely housed underneath or inside a closed umbrella, can be used against powerful demons. And in **ENCOUNTERS OF THE SPOOKY KIND 2**, Samo Hung bites his finger and shoots his blood at the vampire by stomping his right foot. **ENCOUNTERS 2** also features Hung and Lam Zhing Ying battling mummies from Hell and the dreaded snake men, who, for reasons unknown, resemble Lou Diamond Phillips, except they fight better and have poison breath.

Lam Ching Ying continued his Taoist priest character in GH's modern-day classic **INSPECTOR GHOSTBUSTER**. The beginning accents the importance of burning money for the dead (so they can buy things in Heaven). Burning a paper-modeled air conditioner is always useful for a relative in Hell. Lam battles the evil female leader of the Japanese Nine-Daisy Division by destroying her walking zombies, flying and flipping his way on top of a roof, then desperately pulling out all the stops as she transforms from a sexy seductress into a loathsome she-witch and then into a burnt-faced mummified demon. In **ETERNAL COMBAT**, Lam travels through time, chasing a ghostly Japanese warrior who possesses the body of an innocent bystander singing "Delta Dawn" in a church. Weird!

Mixing slapstick with startling brutality, Samo Hung's ghost movies focus on Hung playing an innocent bumpkin amongst a hoard of greedy characters who constantly betray his trust. In **ENCOUNTERS OF THE SPOOKY KIND** (1981), Hung's wife is cheating on him, and her lover invokes the help of a voodoo priest to eliminate him. After being controlled by a voodoo doll and then fighting Lam Ching Ying's possessed policemen, Hung is befriended by a sorcerer who invokes the spirit of a monkey, leading Hung to swing from beams and chatter like an ape while battling a chipmunk-voiced opponent. Next, Hung is bewitched by the child god, Hong Hai Er

The strength of this postage stamp colony's film industry is intertwined with its historical roots in superstition, translated to film via martial arts action.



MR. VAMPIRE, like many Fant-Asia films, combines humor with horror. Here, the characters can't be detected by the vampire while holding their breath.

(equivalent to Zeus' son), which explains why his makeup and peculiar antics leave Western moviegoers wondering just what is going on.

An important aspect of Fant-Asia film which must be recognized in the West is that these films are made for Chinese audiences. Often, the subject matter can be bizarre or confusing, but the visual impact remains enchanting. Fant-Asia flicks employ several thematic devices to give their menu of fantasy and horror a distinctive flavor. Many traditional mythologies, superstitions, and legends are used—of ghosts in love with mortals, battles between demons and righteous swordsmen, and mystical quests—which can sometimes be recast in modern versions as time travel, space travel, and gunplay.

With the success of **A CHINESE GHOST STORY** still on the burners, GH had Wu Ma direct the same stars in **PORTRAIT OF A NYMPH**, which again featured Joey Wong as a ghost who falls in love with a mortal, only to be chastised by a Taoist priest (Ma) and his axe-wielding helper (Yuen Biao). The finale pits Wu and

Yuen jousting assailants from Hell while mounted inside bright red sudan chairs.

By the time Wong starred in the similarly themed **MOON LEGEND**, she had become the first Chinese actor/actress to be successfully associated with a feature creature, known as the "nu guai" or female ghost. In a sense, she had become the Lugosi/Chaney/Karloff of Hong Kong horror flicks [see page 26].

In **CHINESE GHOST STORY**, a tale adapted from the book *Liao Zai*, an ancient anthology of X-rated Chinese ghost stories, the most memorable images were of swirling silk, not exposed skin. Although erotically charged, Tsui and Ching's film didn't depend on lewd photography. However, GH felt there was a market for purveying the ghost stories in their original steamy versions. Their conception of **AN EROTIC GHOST STORY** and its two sequels combined peculiar scatological situations with three scantily clad ghost-fairies performing bizarre sexual acts; yet they could also expertly fight with swords or use their ultra-long-sleeved gowns to wrap around their

opponents and throw them into oblivion. Unlike Hark's work, this film owes a transparent debt to Hollywood, in particular **THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK**.

A barrage of similar soft-porn fantasies soon erupted with titles like Wu Ma's **TWILIGHT SIREN** and **FOX LADY GHOST**, the ultra-steamy **THE GHOST OF KAM PHIC GUM**, **GHOSTLY VIXEN**, **GHOST OF THE FOX**, and the bizarre futuristic android thriller **ROBOTRIX**.

Chinese Fant-Asia flicks are whirling affairs, serendipitous as a gentle breeze yet with the clout of a violent tornado. Laced with predictable search-and-destroy plots, they intelligently weave the traditions of righteous swordsmen, Peking opera, and slapstick satire to mold age-old folklore into modern works of art. The first to benefit from Tsui Hark's adrenalized trajectory of visual imagery was Ching Siu Tung [page 30].

In Ching's films, the line between real and supernatural is poetically blurred. His gravity-defying, human-vegetative heroes bring creative carnage to new heights. Some of his mesmerizing films include: **DUAL TO THE DEATH**, featuring poltergeist-like ninjas who silently float overhead on kites and then meld together to form a 30-foot giant; **WITCH FROM NEPAL**, featuring a truly scary confrontation with Italianesque zombies in a cemetery and a battle between the hero and an evil cat-like creature with inhuman strength; **MOON WARRIORS**, which climaxes with a killer whale saving his sword-wielding master (Andy Lau); the **ROYAL TRAMP** series, sporting deadly villains who use their nails to disembowel their opponent, then insert ropes into zombie warriors to control their fighting movements like puppets; **FLYING DAGGERS**, a film filled with riveting visuals like the outlandish tree top battle between a Cat Lady trying to save her giant, prehensile-tailed fox creature hubby from a flying female bounty hunter who uses body-melting acids and foot-stomping swordplay; **BUTTERFLY AND SWORD**, featuring human bow-and-arrows and a heroine who litters

the canopy of a forest with impaled bodies, left gruesomely swaying in midair from bamboo stalks piercing their chests; the HEROIC TRIO series, which pits three pseudo-future *femmes fatales* fighting prospective world dominators; and TERRA COTTA WARRIOR, a sprawling historically based epic that cutely intertwines China's past and present through the eyes of a time-travelling warrior, immortalized by ingesting the emperor's longevity pill given to him by his lover before she is burned at the stake for their undying and illegal love.

TERRA COTTA inspired GH to produce the HIGHLANDER-like epic, ICEMAN COMETH, which portrays a Ming Dynasty royal guard (Yuen Biao) transported to present-day Hong Kong in pursuit of a mad rapist (Yuen Wah). Starting with a delirious swordfight in a winter wonderland, the film climaxes with a back-breaking confrontation worthy of Hong Kong's best. Another must-see time-travel spectacle is A TALE FROM THE EAST, which features a thrilling clash between a little princess' body-guard and a bloodthirsty vampire amidst an amusement park, ending with an "electrifying" water slide ride.

Currently, the most popular Hong Kong genre is the Hark-invented "costume action drama." Following is a sampling of titles worth seeking. Each contains colorful special effects, incredible photography, and completely innovative scenes that will leave your face looking like a TOM AND JERRY cartoon character, mouth agape, eyes protruding, and tongue drooling to the floor: the quasi-future SAVIOUR OF THE SOUL; SLAVE OF THE SWORD, a sexy version of Ching Siu Tung's BUTTERFLY AND SWORD; Wu Ma's CHINESE GHOST-BUSTERS; Ronny Yu's THE BRIDE WITH WHITE HAIR; and that outrageous classic, GOLDEN SWALLOW, to name a mere pittance of what is out there.

Finally, there's a brand of Fant-Asia best described as

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FANT-ASIA FILMMAKER

PRODUCER TSUI HARK

The one-man fantasy film industry.

By Dr. Craig D. Reid

No place in the world, including Hollywood, can boast a more vital, exciting, and genuinely popular cinema than Hong Kong. Indeed, a tidal wave of Hong Kong talent is crashing against Hollywood's shores, slowly devouring its monopolized grasp on the world's movie pulse. Spearheading this Asian invasion is producer-director Tsui Hark.

Traditionally, understanding foreign cinema has been hampered by language barriers. However, Tsui (pronounced "Choi") churns out films with wild, often outrageous visuals that transcend some of the most laughably bad subtitled translations in movie history. His romantic ghost thrillers and fast-paced supernatural hero sagas have captured the imagination of American art house audiences famished for a popular cinema that can supply a steady diet of enjoyable, innovative, and inventive films.

Vietnamese-born, Hong Kong-raised, and American-trained, Tsui is the acknowledged leader of the new wave of Hong Kong filmmaking, having filmed everything from fantasy, science fiction, and horror to comedy, crime, and action-adventure—along with a



Producer Hark sometimes steps before the cameras, as in FINAL VICTORY.

few genres that Tinseltown could not begin to comprehend. He consistently churns out quality products at breakneck speed and at a fraction of the cost of most top Hollywood filmmakers, yet he leaves them by the wayside.

At the forefront of Tsui's output are his "costume action dramas," a unique genre that began achieving popularity in the West upon the arrival of A CHINESE GHOST STORY (1987). When you see this film, you will be stunned by its fluidity, frenetic action, and completely engaging tone. Unlike similarly conceived American films, which endlessly fuss

over storyboarded special effects and repetitious action, Tsui's ghost flicks are swirling affairs, breezing with effortless vigor while deftly juggling the conventions of martial arts and slapstick in such a way that every supernatural element, whether effect or stunt, is presented in a beguiling matter-of-fact manner, as if no more incredible than anything else in the story. He spins the most delirious and astounding fantasy-horror sequences in world cinema, yet somehow never goes too far and knocks the audience out of the overall spell. How did Tsui become so adept in an industry that is of-

ten guilty of a "copy cat" mentality?

"There are two ways to get involved in the Chinese film industry," Tsui explains. "One is that you work hard as a continuity person, stunt man, or some sort of an assistant in a studio in Hong Kong, or you go overseas to film school. I always wanted to study film. I was so bored after Hong Kong high school that I decided to go to America and study film." He smirks, "My father sent me to the University of Texas, the only school that accepted me. He thought that I was studying medicine, but when he discovered I was studying film, he threatened to hang himself."

After graduating from Texas, Hark returned home, where his 1978 TV mini-series *THE GOLD DAGGER ROMANCE* was acclaimed as one of the most important works in the history of Hong Kong television. His unique camera style and vivid choreographical creations changed the direction of Chinese television. Although long retired from TV, his ground-breaking video visuals are the standard by which new action television filmmakers are judged.

"When I returned to Hong Kong, the industry was changing, and there was money available to replace the old generation of filmmakers. It was first easier to break into television and make those traditional-style *Lian Xu Zhu* Chinese television kung-fu soap operas. I learned that I could change structure and change tradition. It was not all just storytelling but the creation of an emotion or impression, and that the impression must be rooted in the subconscious."

In fact, his most prominent lesson in filmmaking occurred while studying television direction in the States. "One day, when I was a cameraman filming a dance routine inside a studio, my professor told me not just to look in front of the camera but also behind the camera. He said that something interesting is always happening there. When I turned around, I saw shadows of the dancers. He turned my camera around and I shot the shadows. This was truly an amaz-

FANT-ASIA ESCAPISM

"These films are popular because they are unrealistic. People live in small places within themselves, and they need a place to escape. These films offer that opportunity."



Leslie Cheung (*FAREWELL MY CONCUBINE*) and Wu Ma play typical characters in *CHINESE GHOST STORY*, the bumbling leading man and the wise Taoist.

ing idea. He taught me to always look for things that most people weren't looking for or at, in other words, they may be missing something."

His first film, *BUTTERFLY MURDERS* (1979) contained peculiar plot elements mixed with political allegory: it was about a group of people trapped inside a medieval castle and threatened by killer butterflies. "I was very conscious about developing my own style and presenting the kind of material I wanted to do. So I would constantly experiment with new ideas. At the time, *BUTTERFLY* was considered to be pretty unusual and filled with strange concepts." The film was proclaimed as innovative in its style and technique at a time when the market was swamped with the standardized kung-fu pictures that still were drawing crowds.

However, it was his fifth film, *ZU, WARRIORS FROM THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN*, that changed the direction of Asian supernatural cinema. To fully

appreciate Tsui's contribution to the fantasy-martial arts genre, it is essential to understand how supernatural-action fight films evolved in the Hong Kong movie industry. Chinese film first created the *Wu Xia Pian* (hero films) in the 1920s. In these, the heroes could fly, fight with supernatural martial art skills, control weapons with their minds, and shoot "death rays" out of their hands. It wasn't until the late 1960s, with the advent of *Gung-fu Pian* (kung-fu films), that movie characters and fights assumed a more realistic tone. Bruce Lee popularized this style in the minds of American audiences, and Jackie Chan later brought the form to new levels, though without ever achieving Lee's stateside recognition.

In the 1970s, Shaw Brothers financed the creation of *Guo Shu Pian* (Neo-hero films), which eloquently mixed the fights of the old style *Wu Xia Pian* with the popular savvy of the *Gung-fu Pian*. However, in the West, Hong Kong remained synonymous with "Kung-Fu," a term used almost derogatively. This mis-

conception, enhanced by the poorly dubbed movies seen on late night American television, has single handedly tarnished the reputation of an industry. Tsui Hark was the cure.

In 1983, the producer waved his magic scalpel and gave Hong Kong cinema a face lift when he created *ZU*, the first costume action drama, which gracefully intertwined Chinese myth with comic book action. It's a regular rollercoaster of eye-popping magic powers, world-protecting deities, killer poltergeists, and supernatural heroes.

Tsui's novel approach to *Wu Xia Pian* utilized phenomenal fight sequences enhanced by elaborate aerial acrobatics, sharp editing procedures, and a flurry of outrageous camera angles that easily surpassed antecedents in the genre.

Previous Hong Kong ghost films grow tedious very quickly, with even the best sporting an assembly line frugality mired in shallow, apolitical allegory. But the rambunctious *ZU* crossed the lines and dared to address didactic and morally instructive themes. Helming the action choreography was Tsui's friend and colleague, Ching Siu Tung—the start of a phenomenal partnership that would soon be creating cinematic history.

Set in ancient China, which is ravaged by opposing factions, this mesmerizing film raised the sword-and-sorcery genre from its hollows of selfish individualism. Fleeing the bloody battles, a young, wide-eyed warrior, (Yuen Biao) is taken under the wing of a lone swordsman (Adam Cheng) who saves Yuen from flashing-eyed, flying poltergeists in a dungeon cave far below the normal world. Together, they battle a formidable demon known as the Evil One, a large red beast that continuously changes form. One moment it is a fire, then a blanket, then a ghost, and then whatever else is decipherable from the quick-cut editing maneuvers that splice together these far-out visuals.

The two heroes meet another teacher and his young student (Mang Hoy, who was Cynthia Rothrock's ex-fiancee



Romance is a key ingredient of Hark's formula, as in **THE MAGIC CRANE** with Anita Mui (above), **GREEN SNAKE** with Joey Wong and Maggie Cheung (right), and **CHINESE GHOST STORY III** with Wong and Tony Leung (below).

in Hong Kong), but the teachers refuse to join forces because of their opposing schools of thought. The Evil One dispatches blood crows that invade men's souls, and both teachers, at different times, become possessed, transforming into evil, silvered-faced demonic puppets capable of destroying world peace.

The teachers are cured by a mock-frigid countess (Brigitte Lin Ching Xia) who lives with her underling virgin women warriors in a cave and fights by using long, flowing, scarf-like sleeves. As ridiculous as this sounds, the colorful imagery defeats viewer incredulity. At times, the film appears almost soppy but manages to remain romantic. Yet the finale turns coldly symbolic, filled with prescribed morality.

The Evil One awaits the "Egression" of the Blood Beast, which is under the waning control of a priest, called "Long Brows" in the subtitles (Hong Ching Boa), who appropriately enough uses his long white eyebrows to imprison the unearthly creature. The students must achieve what the teachers could not: to fuse their sacred swords (representing the heavens and the earth), even at the risk of forfeiting their lives. Upon the successful slaying of the Blood Beast and the Evil One, the face of a Goddess fills the screen, acknowledging her approval of the completion of

their destined mission. The eyebrowed priest ends the film by saying, "The young are really taking over the world," further assuring that nothing in the climax can be misinterpreted.

Tsui explains, "I brought in American special effects technicians [Peter Kuran's Visual Concepts Engineering] to help in the filming of ZU. Because the American and Hong Kong systems of filmmaking are different, I was concerned that the American technicians might have a difficult time adjusting to the Hong Kong workers and methods of filming. When they saw the lab and crew, they probably wondered how the devil they could work under these conditions. They constantly had arguments, and indeed they couldn't get along with the Hong Kong crew." Tsui's nightmares had just begun.



"Nine months later, during postproduction, I realized that about 50 shots were missing. Apparently a line producer, without my knowledge, had edited out scenes from the script. I asked Golden Harvest to let me reshoot and re-edit the project for free. They declined my offer. ZU could have been much better. It has fast action, but it isn't a fancy film."

Still, the film did very well domestically and internationally, encouraging such hyperbole as labeling Tsui the Hitch-

cock/Spielberg of Asia. "I am very honored to be placed in the same breath as film greats such as Alfred Hitchcock and Steven Spielberg," he admits, adding, "I appreciate the praise, but I am embarrassed."

In the West, we are quick to label top foreign talents with American counterparts, which imposes American perspectives and expectations onto that which is not American. This is unfair and possibly even patronizing. Tsui's films are rich and full of texture with much to offer his viewers that is more than a mere Oriental imitation of American films.

Tsui had not only invented a new genre; he had also become a pioneer in Hong Kong special effects. In 1986 he founded his own company, Cinefex Workshop. His first project with them was the surprisingly successful **ROBO-FORCE** (aka **I LOVE MARIA**), a futuristic fantasy-action film wherein robots possess the emotions and intelligence of humans. Once again collabo-

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FANT-ASIA VIDEO

WHERE TO FIND IT

Don't give up hope just because there's no Chinese theatre in your area.

By Dr. Craig D. Reid

Instead of being infected by the Asian swine flu, let your defenses down long enough to succumb to the latest epidemic spreading across America, the Hong Kong horror bug—or the Fant-Asia flu. There are many ways to become contaminated, but the best inoculation is a visit to your local Asian video outlet: the neighborhood grocery store, which often doubles as either a restaurant or an Oriental trading company.

One usually finds films stored in milk cartons or haphazardly stacked on bookshelves, either behind the checkout counter or in an obscure corner.

As you enter these secret havens decorated with exotic gifts and Oriental food-products, keep in mind that, besides not knowing the English titles, the "lao ban" (boss) will know less than you about current Hong Kong film. So, before you start hopping around

Hong Kong films available on video run the gamut from **ROBOTRIX** (left), an adults-only sci-fi thriller, to **EAST IS RED** (below), a period fantasy adventure.





Films like **THE BRIDE WITH HAIR** (above and right) can be found at midnight screenings, in neighborhood Chinese theatres, and on video, if you look hard.

like a Chinese vampire to get your point across, check out the boxes for any weird pictures; see if there are any English titles; try to find the names of any of the actors or directors mentioned in these articles; and, if all else fails, ask the boss whether they have any "Wu Xia Pian" (pronounced woo she-ah pee-yen), which is a generic term for films with flying kung-fu heroes, usually based on magical and mystical tales of old-time China.

A trip to the local Blockbuster will end in a similar fashion to the recent baseball season. However, go to all the other local video stores and check in their martial arts sections. You may be surprised to find many pre-1980 Hong Kong and Taiwanese horror films. Although badly dubbed, the visual impact will still be the same.

If you live in places like Toronto, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, and even St. Louis, there are theaters that cater to

Asian audiences. These places usually play two or three different Hong Kong films every other week. Ironically, except for theaters in America's Chinatowns, more non-Asians than Asians show up at these screenings, according to President Tom Gray of Rim Films, which distributes Hong Kong flicks to specialty theatres nationwide.

The best way to find specific titles is to purchase them from Chinese video distributors. The two largest in America are Tai Seng Video Marketing Inc. and NYUE Enterprises. For information and an updated catalog, call Tai Seng at (415) 871-2392 and NYUE Enterprises at (212) 619-0800.

You are now entering another dimension, so scout around and be patient, because you never know what could be hopping or flying towards you from around the next corner. The Chinese have gods for everything, so say a prayer to the Chinese god of film, Dian Ying. □





FANT-ASIA

HONG KONG'S

Joey Wong and Brigitte Lin

By Dr Craig D. Reid

With seemingly limitless black hair hypnotically wafting in the wind, these ghostly beauties breeze through the catacombs of the Chinese netherworld or fly toward heaven with their silken gowns swirling like drifting confetti. Is it a bird, a plane? No, it's the alluring ghost Sian played by Joey Wong (Wang Zu Xian) in *A CHINESE GHOST STORY* and the Ice Princess played by Brigitte Lin (Lin Ching Xia) in *ZU, WARRIOR FROM THE MAGIC MOUNTAIN*.

Lin and Wong are the biggest female imports from Hong Kong in a long time. Their careers are almost identical. Both born and raised in Taiwan, they not only made their first film appearances in low-budget love stories, but also advanced their careers through their association with producer Tsui Hark.

Fresh from studying in America and earning awards in Taiwan as a top female actress, Lin broke her love story mold by playing a slinky, whip-cracking cat burglar in Tsui's *ALL THE WRONG SPIES*, then flew into Fant-Asia as the mock-frigid, magical flying ice maiden in Tsui's *ZU* (1983). She then appeared in the bizarre, "don't blink or you will miss something" horror-fantasy flick *DEMON FIGHTER*, wherein she encountered white shadow demons, evil sorcerers, gold and silver plated beasts, and a pit of boiling red acid.

After major roles in Jackie Chan's *FANTASY MISSION FORCE* and *POLICE STORY*,

several lower-budgeted, female-oriented contemporary action films (*GOLDEN QUEEN COMMANDO*, *PHOENIX THE RAIDER*, *LADY IN BLACK*, etc.) seemed to indicate that Lin's talents were going to waste.

Then in 1986, she starred in Tsui's acclaimed *PEKING OPERA BLUES*, as a character torn between her political conscience and her traitorous father. However, Lin's newfound international reputation stems more from her searing portrayal of the she-male, Dong Fang Bu Bai (i.e. *Invincible Fong of Asia*) in the final two chapters of Tsui's epic *SWORDSMAN* trilogy.

In *SWORDSMAN III/EAST IS RED*, Wong plays a devoted lover to the transsexual Lin, who finally realizes that her love for Wong transcends her insatiable quest for world domination. However, Wong's fame and fandom stems from her portrayal of the sublime apparition whose undying love for a naive mortal threatened her spiritual longevity in *CHINESE GHOST STORY*.

Wong recalls, "At first, I wasn't even being considered for the role in *GHOST STORY*. I had already worked with Tsui in *WORKING CLASS* and *BIG HEAT*, and I knew that he was developing a costume drama film. It was an unexpected opportunity, because I thought my great height might have been a handicap, since most of the successful female actors of the era were short."

Wong quickly became the definitive incarnation of the spectral concubine and fox spirits so prevalent in the popular tradition of *Wu Xia* novels



FEMME FATALES

DYNAMIC DUO

imbue legends with seductive charm.



Brigitte Lin and Joey Wong teamed up in *EAST IS RED*, the third *SWORDSMAN* film (opposite page above). Individually, they have starred in *A CHINESE GHOST STORY* (Wong, opposite below), and in *DRAGON'S INN* (Lin, above).

of antiquated China. The dazzling repercussion of *GHOST STORY*'s popularity not only spawned two sequels, but perhaps condemned Wong to be typecast in many similar films, including *PORTRAIT OF A NYMPH*, *MING GHOST*, *LADY WOLF*, *PAINTED SKIN*, and the hypnotic *MOON LEG- END*, which features a mesmerizing Wong clothed in a bright red flowing gown, rhythmically shimmying her long, whirling sleeves to spell-binding music, as Jacky Cheung performs a spinning, dance-like sword maneuver.

Although *GHOST STORY II* cast her in a new role as a female warrior, Wong continued her pseudo-submissive persona in a series of time travel extravaganzas—*AN ETERNAL BATTLE*, *DEMONESS FROM 1000 YEARS*—followed by a rare against-type appearance as an evil, battling swordswoman in *BEHEADED 1000*.

Further paralleling Lin's career, Wong starred in Jackie Chan's *CITY HUNTER*, and several other cop-action films, such as *CYPRUS TIGER*, *KILLER ROMANCE*, and *POINT OF NO RETURN*, then starred opposite Lin in Tsui's *DECEPTION*, a black comedy about four beautiful but evil women who attain their goals at the expense of each other.

However, Wong had already submerged herself into the collective conscious as the contemporary embodiment of medieval beauty, so she is finding it difficult to escape from her wraith-like image. "It is true that directors are afraid to attempt anything other than what they see has worked," she laments. "It's the old adage: don't fix anything that isn't broken. I'd really love to play a complete bitch in a contemporary setting."

Lin, now in her 40s, amplified her fame by playing gen-

der-bender roles in such films as Ching Siu Tung's *ROYAL TRAMP III* and *HANDSOME SIBLINGS*. But, just as her popularity appeared to be waning, she landed the lead role in *THE BRIDE WITH WHITE HAIR*, playing a beautiful witch-girl raised by wolves. Her character, Lian, rescues a young warrior, Zhuo, who eventually joins forces with revolutionary armies opposed to the evil Mo Dynasty, ruled by male-female Siamese twins, one of whom lusts for Lian. Because of her love for Zhuo, the twins strip Lian of her rank, humiliate and exile her, then trick Zhuo into believing that Lian betrayed him. The film ends in a frenzy of swordplay and bone-crunching stunts, as Lian, devastated by Zhuo's lack of faith, releases her pent-up anger amidst the mournful transformation of her flowing black hair into a ghostly white. The sequel focuses on Lian's unabated hatred for men, as she searches the countryside for male-exploited females and forms an army bent on destroying men, until Zhuo comes out of hiding to rescue his nephew from Lian and her misguided amazons.

Lin then improved her acting skills by joining the top stage-performing group in Asia, Taiwan's Performance Workshop, headed by the versatile actor-director duo of Lee Li Chuin and Stan Lai. Her newly honed talents as a sword-wielding, wiley adversary were displayed in Tsui's *DRAGON INN* and in *FIREY DRAGON*, wherein Lin plays an infernal warrior who uses

continued on page 61

rating with Ching Siu Tung, Tsui created an extravagant barrage of exciting special effects, high wire excitement, and hilarious sight gags. A cute love triangle—among two men (played by Tsui and John Sham) and their robot Maria (Sally Yeh)—accents Tsui's bizarre approach to on-screen romance. After bar room shenanigans and Maria's apparent headfirst diving demise into a gigantic air vent fan, the film climaxes with her return to battle an evil robot created by a government conglomeration. This film was released several years prior to the similarly conceived battle between two robots in *ROBOCOP*.

Tsui further strengthened his foothold at the top of the Hong Kong horror industry with *A CHINESE GHOST STORY*. "When I was 13, I started making short 8 mm experimental films about magic," he recalls. "I also created and drew an old-style kung-fu comic strip for a local paper. Although I never practiced martial arts, I did enjoy reading *Wo Xia* novels [depicting heroes using supernatural fighting skills to battle evil beings]. Basically, Chinese and American audiences watch a lot of horror films. I didn't want to emulate the American productions, so I decided to make a horror film that the Chinese audience could relate to. It was a traditional tale so we called it *A CHINESE GHOST STORY*. I wanted to make a romantic story about a female ghost falling in love with a mortal man." The film debuted three years before the similarly themed U.S. hit *GHOST*.

In this lyrical tale of invincible demons and unrequited love, an innocent tax collector (Leslie Cheung) finds himself caught up in a monumental struggle against ubiquitous evil spirits amidst his obsessive infatuation with a ghost of exquisite beauty (Joey Wong). The most memorable images are of swirling silk—the beautiful ghost's long sleeves flowing like a spinning hypno-wheel as she vanishes into thin air while flying toward the heavens. In a plot predating *THE GUARDIAN*

by several years, an evil androgynous demon, which takes the form of a tree during daylight hours, commands the reluctant ghost to seduce wandering swordsmen and bring them to his/her lair. The demon's endless vine-like tongue then hurtles through forests, plunging into the unfortunate lover's mouth while sucking out his vital fluids.

The poet is selected to become the tree demon's next victim, until the ghost-girl falls in love with him. Then with the help of a Taoist hermit (Wu Ma) they storm the gates of the underworld. The earthlings brandish sacred sutras and heavenly swords against the black hordes of demon soldiers, so that the girl can be set free, thence to be reincarnated and returned to the world of daylight.

"The problem was how to make a horror film romantic," says Tsui. "Because this film didn't use a lot of monstrous creatures and gory blood and guts, it was essential to focus on other elements. Sure, there were giant-tongued monsters and ghosts, but it was necessary to focus on the psychological things, things that people face everyday in their lives, then to enlarge them to the point that they are scary. In other words, horror films don't need to have monsters to be scary. Besides, creating monsters time after time limits that genre. In Hong Kong films, most of the budget is for paying the big name stars, but these films have lower budgets because the stars are the horror sequences or the special effects."

Tsui's ghost movies are basically action extensions of Taoism, wherein the spirit-battling priests believe that Heaven and Earth are limitless and that a man who sincerely identifies himself with the "path of righteousness" can be every bit as powerful as the most dreaded demon. This is more visually compelling when the actors portraying these worldly priests use nothing but their own bodies for the action sequences, flouting the laws of gravity, human anatomy and common sense. The showy displays of choreography are

A CHINESE GHOST STORY

"The problem was how to make a horror film romantic. Because this film didn't use a lot of monstrous creatures and gore, it was essential to focus on other elements."



Joey Wong is beset by demons in the conclusion of ACHINESE GHOST STORY.

the *raison d'etre* of the film, proving the unprovable to even the most skeptical eye. Once more, the key to the choreography was in the hands of Ching Siu Tung, who went on to direct the sequels.

Tsui resumed the saga in A CHINESE GHOST STORY II, which, though not as well structured as Part I, presented as many exciting set pieces and earned more at the boxoffice. Whereas the first sequel concluded the story of the human characters from Part 1, A CHINESE GHOST STORY III takes place a century later, when the tree demon reawakens—a remake of the first, with a Buddhist monk stepping in the footsteps of Cheung's tax collector. "A CHINESE GHOST STORY III was an idea I had a long time ago," says Tsui. "I wanted to see a celibate monk fall in love with a beautiful, seductive ghost. I believe that romance is the most important ingredient necessary to make a film successful. I adapt material to fit what people have been used to looking for and blend them into the audience's current way of living now. However, the CHINESE GHOST

STORIES are all basically doomsday comedies."

Many American action filmmakers endlessly repeat the same motifs, hoping that their redundancy is hidden beneath more pulverizing and extravagant effects. Ignoring this frivolous fear, Tsui moved beyond ZU and GHOST STORY to develop a successful line of stylized supernatural martial-arts costume dramas. Such hits as THE IRON MONKEY, THE RAID, and DRAGON INN have all paved the way for countless imitations.

But most noteworthy among this genre is the Ching Siu Tung-directed trilogy of SWORDSMAN films. These pay homage to the classic Chinese swordplay epics of yesteryear, combining wild displays of ballet-like action with mysterious rituals and supernatural powers. They are great examples of films that combine entertainment with spiritual sustenance, where Good battles Evil and high-vaulting villains disguise themselves as champions of the lowly. Plainly speaking, they're mighty impressive-looking and just a lot of fun to watch.

The culmination of this trilogy recounts (sometimes vaguely) the struggle between rival factions and individuals trying to protect or selfishly master the mystical powers described in the heavily sought-after manuscript, *The Divine Book*. The role call of characters varies from mysterious Japanese swordsmen loyal to the titular swordsman (Sam Hui in Part 1, Jet Li in Parts II and III), to a superpowered eunuch, the Invincible Fong of Asia, a man (Cheung Man) who, following the book's instruction, castrates himself in order to achieve spiritual power and then turns into a feminine-looking androgyne (Brigitte Lin Ching Xia).

The films are alive with gross images of killer bees, swarming scorpions, and hanging snakes—not to mention bodies either exploding apart, ripping in half, or imploding into their own heads when their "life essence" is drained by an opponent. The carnage is endless in conception, demonstrating more of an operatic style of melodrama than action or violence.

The tempo of these films produces an authentic, startling rush of excitement, so that the unabated pleasure and exhilaration of moviegoing is reborn close to its purest form of fun. But their strength is that they contain a ring of authentic popular culture and feature the kind of classic storytelling found in Hollywood's old-style pictures. "These films are popular because they are so unrealistic," Tsui believes. "People live in small places within themselves, and they need a place to escape. Lots of stuff in these films offers them that opportunity to escape. They are based on old Chinese novels, and I believe there is a resurgence in these kinds of stories. Love is the conceptual thing and not really the reality."

GREEN SNAKE, his latest release in the U.S., is based upon an old-style Chinese novel, *Madam White Snake*. The story concerns two giant female snake spirits, White (Joey Wong) and Green (Maggie Cheung), who want to become human. White falls in

love with a teacher, sparking a comedic rivalry between the two snakes. When Green becomes sexually aroused, she reverts into snake form, confusing the poor teacher, who is led to believe he's suffering from hallucinations. The film is filled with spiritual anomalies and fiery weapons of spiritual unification, with just a pinch of Tsui's usual fight choreography, and topped-off with some far-out visuals featuring a giant green snake rising from the ocean during the climactic confrontation with a powerful monk who believes that differ-



In *A CHINESE GHOST STORY*, Joey Wong's ghost is whipped by a predatory demon for hiding an intended victim (Leslie Cheung, inset), whom she loves.



ent classes of beings—humans, spirits, and animals—should remain separate.

In another recent costume drama, *MAGIC CRANE*, Tsui again returns to his love for traditional Chinese stories. It's about a priestess who rides on the back of a giant white crane, attempting to save righteous men from killing each other. Tsui's genius and creativity appears to be boundless. This film contains more incredible aerial fight sequences, giant turtles, and a curious battle between two *femmes fatales* (Anita Mui vs. Rosamund Kwan), who frantically play musical instruments aboard a ship while the vessel disintegrates under the awesome power of shrill-sounding musical notes. Tsui also used this film to express, subliminally and poetically, his views on loyalty, love, hope, fear, and even revenge.

As always, the stunts and

virtuoso swordplay are woven into a larger-than-life emotional fabric, using technique to insure audience identification. "Emotion is the most essential element in my films," states Tsui. "By taking many shots from different angles, I can bring out the emotions of a scene. The emotion of fight sequences is also important, and tempo is produced by sharp editing procedures and by paying close attention to camera operations."

Another recent technique-laden Tsui Hark production is *WICKED CITY*, director Mak Tai Kit's futuristic science-fiction thriller, based on the Japanese anime feature [see page 32] wherein people battle aliens called Raptors that can change into human form at will. Some Raptors wish to experience the human emotion of love, while others hate humans. The film's menu features entrees like a female

sex-goddess changing into a seething spider-lady. Side dishes include a Rapter hit-woman who changes into a pinball machine, a motorcycle, and an elevator. For dessert, the antagonist turns into an octopus-like being, then engages in a jousting match with the protagonist. Mounting their Boeing 747 jet steeds, they duel while flying between the real world and the doomsday world of the Raptors.

Such flashy set-pieces boggle the brain, but always the fanciful elements are grounded in what makes the story human—whether it is Ken (Jacky Cheung) or Taki (Leon Lai) in *WICKED CITY* contemplating Rapter killing, or Maggie Cheung in *GREEN SNAKE* forcefully squinting her eyes in an effort to master her older sibling's ability to express emotion by crying. She eventually succeeds, but only when she has an authentic reason, and by then the tragic turns of plot have convinced her to abandon her new-found humanity.

These melodramatic stories, filled with flamboyant acting and risque emotions, vividly display Hong Kong cinema's most delightful quality: its lush

extravagance. Tsui's films are filled with laughs, tears, battles, subplots, striking visual metaphors, character roles, and many other pleasing delights that he dreams up, often on the set. And beneath all this blissful entertainment there is even a theme.

For example, Tsui has not neglected to touch upon the subject of 1997. The poor economic situation of futuristic Hong Kong in *WICKED CITY* is blamed on the 1997 takeover, and the *SWORDSMAN* trilogy is not only a parody of communist China, but Part III's English title is *THE EAST IS RED*, probably the most famous opera written during the Cultural Revolution.

"The *SWORDSMAN* films are about hatred, conflict, and brotherhood," Tsui explains. "But mostly they're full of hope. However, I personally feel that to do a film, specifically a human-interest story, just to appease or generate feelings of pity—well, it's a flimsy reason to make a film. But one always needs hope, and the films are about bringing friends together with the help of song. It's a parody on the Cultural Revolution, reflecting the hatreds of splitting up but eventually getting back together."

Another common theme in



Hong Kong heroes match the villains' powers in aerial combat, such as Jet Li in *SWORDSMAN II*, a Hark production with choreography by Ching Sui Tung.

Tsui's films is love. Whether ghosts in *CHINESE GHOST STORY*, aliens in *WICKED CITY*, snakes in *GREEN SNAKE*, or robots in *ROBOFORCE*, Tsui is predisposed towards non-human beings attempting to find love with mortals. "Love is very difficult to express in Chinese culture, so in my films I like to have a romantic touch where the non-human looks for love," he explains. "The simple, single-minded people avoiding love survive. It's the intellectuals who have the most complicated attitudes, who won't survive. This is what I believe."

Although Tsui rewrote the book on Chinese traditional-style films, he has also been credited with developing some of the most violent action pics in the history of cinema, including *A BETTER TOMORROW* and *THE KILLER*, both directed by his friend John Woo. The crescendos of gunfire and pyrotechnical marvels push the violence quotient well past the level of the more fanciful supernatural films. Fortunately, Hong Kong censors aren't as harsh about cinematic bloodshed as they are about dangerous political material.

"Kung-fu films have such a long tradition here that people understand that action films can get very violent," he explains. "However, now that violence is getting more sensational, the censors do indeed have a new rating system similar to your American ratings. But it is difficult to apply a stan-

dard against different types of styles, and it's hard to define just what the limit is. So we must discipline ourselves and impose our own kind of self-censorship."

Tsui's work taps into popular audience feelings. Unlike the more self-consciously arty mainland Chinese films traditionally selected for foreign-language Oscar consideration, his is a truly exciting commercial cinema, rivaling anything currently produced by Hollywood. Presently, Tsui is in negotiations with Francis Ford Coppola to direct a film entitled *MAI*, the Japanese-based story of a psychic girl. His "dream project," however, is to remake the classic Chinese tale of a monkey looking for his humanity in a film he calls *THE MONKEY KING*, which would utilize animatronics, similar to those in *THE DARK CRYSTAL*.

Whether or not that dream comes true, and whether or not he makes his American debut, Tsui will continue to astound us with his amazing genre films, which show no sign of diminishing returns. Even while sticking to popular genres he himself helped formulate, his recent works like *GREEN SNAKE* and *MAGIC CRANE* are every bit as fresh and inventive as *ZU* and *CHINESE GHOST STORY*. "You have to survive by wanting to do something," Tsui concludes. "No matter how cliched, the major thing that works is the emotion you believe in. No one will become the best and most perfect just by wanting to be the best and most perfect." □

FANT-ASIA FIGHT MASTER

CHING SIU TUNG

*Action choreographer
to the stars.*

By Dr. Craig D. Reid

The fanciful fighting style that is the trademark of director Ching Siu Tung resulted from a lifetime of study starting when, under the direction of his father, he quit regular school at the age of eight. "My father had me live on the Shaw Brothers Studio Grounds, where I enrolled in Chinese opera school for seven years, something similar to Jackie Chan," Tung recollects. "In fact, we are of the same generation of fight choreographers. I started as an extra in fight scenes when I was ten, then became a double, stunt man, choreographer, then a director. It has been an arduous 30-year process."

Ching met Tsui Hark in 1979, while both were working in TV. He worked for Tsui as a fight director on *ZU*, *WARRIOR FROM MAGIC MOUNTAIN* and *ROBOFORCE*, then as director for both the *SWORDSMAN* and the *CHINESE GHOST STORY* trilogies.

"During the filming of *GHOST STORY*, Tsui gave me a lot of room to operate," says the director. "He is a great producer and filmmaker, and his suggestions were good, yet he never restricted me. I don't believe in ghosts, Chinese gods, or supernatural-powered human spirits, although while filming, we were all looking for something

strange to happen; sadly, nothing did. I make these films like an old traditional-style Chinese painting, but with modern day dialogue; that way, I bring the audience into the film with modern associations and make believe that the story could really happen."

Having Ching on a film guarantees financial success. Recent supernatural-horror hits benefiting from his Midas touch include *MOON WARRIORS*, *ROYAL TRAMP*, *MAD MONK*, *FLYING DAGGERS*, and *BUTTERFLY AND SWORD*. In fact, he has set a new precedent in Chinese film. Finally, an audience could be lured into the theater, based solely on who the action-fight director was. Today, some fight directors (like Ching) get more notoriety than the films' stars.

Interestingly enough, only a few of those stars working for Ching in his rapid-fire action sequences know or practice any martial arts seriously. He makes these novices appear to be age-old experts. He also seems to specialize in featuring female leads as the main fighting characters. As a stuntman, he would double for women, and his first film was about four women cops. Because of his popularity, Ching is never short on getting the top sexy female stars to spice up his already hot choreographical platters.



Ching Siu Tung (below, with Dr. Craig Reid) went on to produce his own films: e.g. *THE HEROIC TRIO*, with Michelle Kahn, Maggie Cheung, and Anita Mui (inset).

"Many actresses in Hong Kong want either to work with me or have me work for them," he claims. "They know that I will make them look good. Basically, we try to make their movements pretty; so even if they can't act or fight, we will make them look like a good actor. The key is that we 'beautify' everyone. Besides, in supernatural films, it's the effects and action that sell the film and not specifically the stars."

His latest fighting *femme* force—Anita Mui, Maggie Cheung, and Michelle Kahn—is featured in the two *HEROIC TRIO* films, which mark Ching's transition to producing his own features. Laced with less martial art razzle dazzle, this series instead focuses on comic book

violence of the brooding, Dark Knight variety, combining elements from *THE TERMINATOR* and *SILVER STREAK* with new stuff that Evil Knievel could only dream about.

"My fights are never scripted, yet they are planned out ahead of time," he explains. "I won't allow a star to fly higher than 30 feet; their maximum height depends on how experienced they are, and if they feel confident. I don't practice martial arts anymore; instead, I use my brain to create packages of movements, rather than physical ability. It all comes from experience, and tempo is the key to the proper emotional content. We are like magicians, using sleight of hand maneuvers."

Each year Ching continues

to set new standards for swordfighting outrageousness with films that zealously celebrate grandiose action, producing impressive images of wide-eyed wonderment that leave you shaking your head in disbelief and astonishment. His heroes are either fierce warriors or innocent bumpkins clad in flowing robes who can casually slaughter their enemies. This on-land swashbuckling style of filmmaking has been compared to the high seas action-adventure works of the late Michael Curtiz (*CAPTAIN BLOOD*), but Ching remains unpretentious in spite of accolades. "My philosophy on filmmaking is quite simple: don't make films that no one will watch; make films that the audience will enjoy." □



STREAMLINE PICTURES IMPORTERS OF OUTRAGEOUS ANIMAE

The distributor of the best in Japanese adult animation.

By Todd French

Psychic cyberpunks, demi-vampire heroes, mutant titans with brain-blowing pugilistic abilities, all served up with heavy doses of orgiastic sex and gore—yes, today's Japanese animation is light-years removed from the sunny-cel realms of such classics as *ASTRO BOY*, *THE EIGHTH MAN*, and *GIGANTOR*. If you've recently become familiar with the work of such serious anime aces as Dezaki, Otomo, Miyazaki, and Kawajiri, you probably have Streamline Pictures to thank. Among stateside distributors, the Los Angeles-based company has quite possibly done more than anyone else to garner the art form's acceptance in this country.

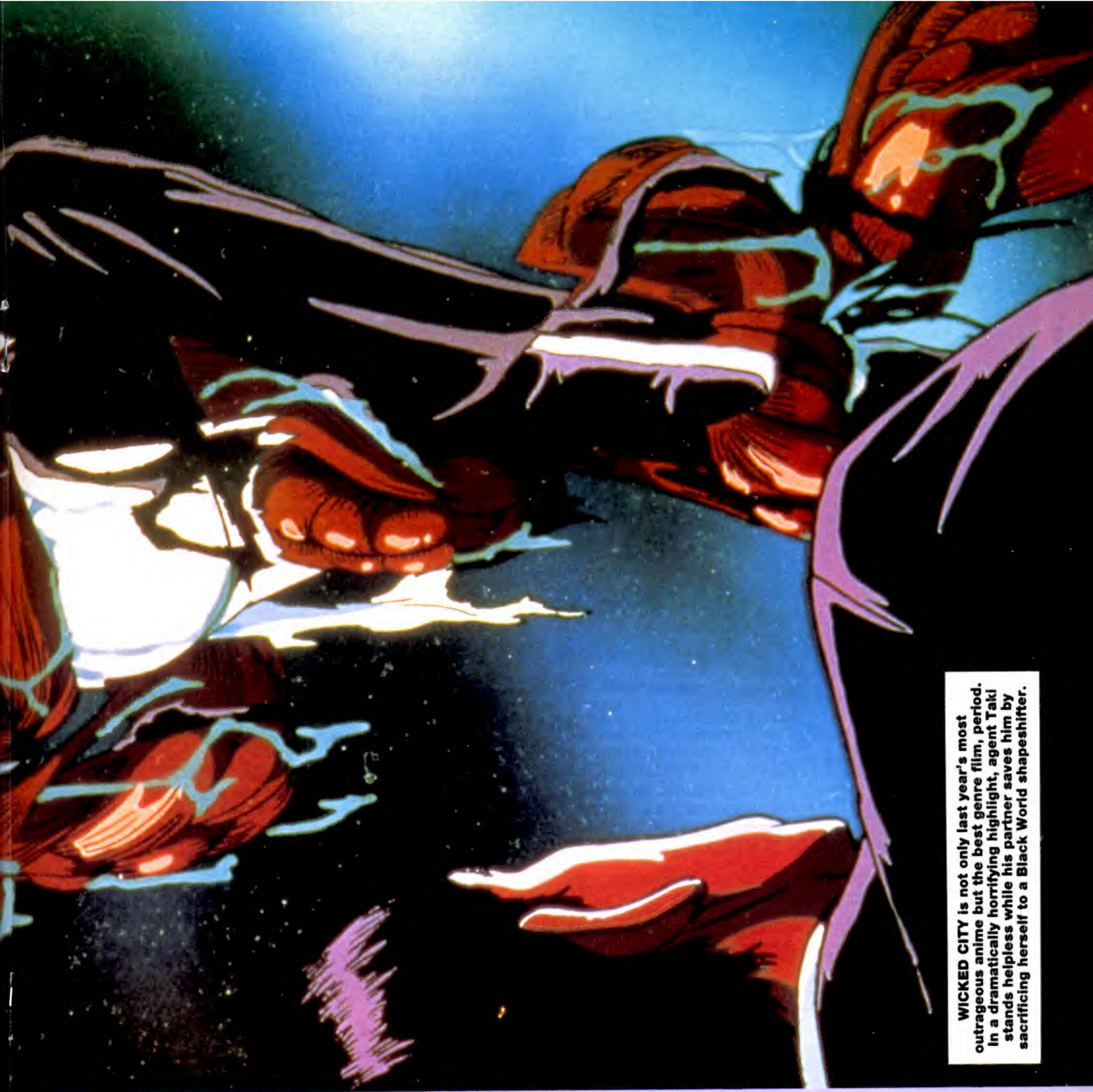
"I consider it 'alternative animation,'" says Streamline president Carl Macek, "an alternative to Disney and TV animation shows. The best thing about Japanese animation is that it's by filmmakers, not animators. When you look at the finest Japanese animation, you say, 'Here's the work of Otomo or Kawajiri!' These aren't cartoons; these are the works of directors who have something



it's animation doesn't mean that it's not a valid form of entertainment."

This new wave of alternative animation had been available to U.S. fan groups as far back as 1975. However, it was relegated mostly to the realm of video and laserdisc, where (especially in the latter format) it became an acquired taste among hardcore devotees willing to shell out big bucks in order to own the latest offering from their favorite anime auteurs. For the average filmgoer, however, opportunities for theatrical viewings were few and far between, mostly the odd entry at occasional film festivals, such as the perennially popular LUPIN III: CAS-TLE OF CAGLIOSTRO. Meanwhile, other worthwhile entries met disastrous fates: Tezuka's PHOENIX 2772 was cut down to 88 minutes and badly dubbed to boot; Miyazaki's environmental science-fiction parable NAUSICAA OF THE VALLEY OF THE WIND was picked up by New World Pictures in 1984, re-edited to 88 minutes, shorn of adult material, and consigned to video obscurity. But perhaps the most inhibiting stateside factor was the tendency for mainstream film moguls and audiences alike to regard animation as strictly the G-rated province of anthropomorphized animals and dinosaurs.

That changed in 1988. Aware of the growing strength of anime fandom and the potential market for Japanese science-fiction animation, Macek (who, along with REN & STIMPY creator John Kricfalusi, had co-founded independent animation company Spumco), formed Streamline Pictures with film distribution executive Jerry Beck and set



WICKED CITY is not only last year's most outrageous anime but the best genre film, period. In a dramatically horrifying highlight, agent Taki stands helpless while his partner saves him by sacrificing herself to a Black World shapeshifter.

Neo-Tokyo is about to E • X • P • L • O • D • E



Based on the Graphic Novel by KATSUHIRO OTOMO

Art Director TOSHIHARU MIZUTANI • Chief Animator TAKASHI NAKAMURA • Scenario IZO HASHIMOTO • Music SHOJI YAMASHIRO • Producer RYOHEI SUZUKI • Character Design / Script / Direction KATSUHIRO OTOMO

Katsuhiro Otomo's AKIRA is one of the best and most successful Streamline releases. The cyberpunk science-fiction imagery at times recalls Ridley Scott's BLADE RUNNER and the ultra-violence of Kubrick's A CLOCKWORK ORANGE, in the opening motorcycle joust (below).

about bringing the best available Japanimation to the awareness of cinema-going North America. At last, on a semi-regular basis, these films could be seen as intended, in all their big screen glory. [See

CFQ 20:4:47.]

Streamline's first coups were the theatrical releases of Hiro Miyazaki's LAPUTA: CASTLE IN THE SKY and TWILIGHT OF THE COCK-ROACHES in spring and summer of 1989. The former had already been dubbed into English when acquired for a six-month test marketing period. TWILIGHT was released in a version with subtitles written by Macek. Though both films met with minor success on the art house circuit, Streamline had more ambitious projects in the wings. With the release of Japanese comic book and anime artist Katsuhiro Otomo's violent, visionary cyberpunk sci-fi thriller AKIRA later that year, Macek and Beck became major suppliers of anime to America. Dubbed by another company (like LAPUTA), AKIRA became a cult fave, grossing \$1 million at the domestic box office.

On the heels of that success, in 1990 Streamline distributed LENS MAN, based on the space opera novels by E. E. "Doc" Smith, followed in 1991 by the ROBOT CARNIVAL anthology and Miyazaki's Lupin III feature CASTLE OF CAGLIOSTRO. Subsequent titles include the future-warrior splatter-toon FIST OF THE



Animation festival fave CASTLE OF CAGLIOSTRO received new life on video, in a dubbed version.

FILM GUIDE

By Todd French

NOTE: Although Streamline is still in the theatrical business, they now handle a wide variety of anime on video, including features and OVA (original video animation). Wherever the video version of a feature differs from its theatrical release, this has been noted.

FEATURES

AKIRA ★★★★★
Writer-director: Katsuhiro Otomo. An Akira Committee Production, 1989, 124 mins.

Otomo's breathless adaptation of his 1800-page graphic novel remains an anime landmark. This visually stunning cyberpunk epic explores themes of anti-consumerism and political corruption at breakneck speed. In 2019, 31 years after WW III, the reactionary government strives to crush marauding rebels in Neo-Tokyo while various factions vie for control of Akira, a prescient organic mass with apocalyptic powers. Caught in the struggle are a band of punk bikers led by good guy Kaneda, his put-upon lieutenant Tetsuo (name translates as "Iron Man"), beautiful rebel Kay, and a group of psi-gifted kinder controlled by the government elite. When Tetsuo's nascent psychic abilities emerge, the warring parties must unite to stop the power-drunk youth from hooking-up with Akira and precipitating a new cataclysm.

Though occasionally short on sense (no doubt due to narrative compression) and saddled with a metaphysically diffuse ending, AKIRA is a staggering achievement. Dystopic vision of the future rivals BLADE RUNNER in sheer scope, and the movie works as both pop action epic and thought-provoking meditation on Nippon concerns of cyclical annihilation-and-renewal and moral accountability.

Released theatrically in an adequate but pedestrian English-language version (the flat dialogue and delivery seldom lived up to the mind-boggling imagery, and the use of actors to voice multiple



roles was occasionally obvious), the film is available in two video versions. The subtitled and letterboxed SPECIAL EDITION is the preferred choice for fans, especially since AKIRA is one of the few films to feature pre-recorded dialogue, a la Disney (most anime is post-dubbed), which was carefully lip-synced by the animators.

THE CASTLE OF CAGLIOSTRO ★★★

Director: Hayao Miyazaki. Script: Miyazaki & Maruya Yamazaki. A Monkey Punch/Tokyo Movie Shinsha Production, 1980/1991, 100 mins.

As evidenced by films like LAPUTA: CASTLE IN THE SKY, MY NEIGHBOR TOTORO, KIKI'S DELIVERY SERVICE, and NAUSICAA OF THE VALLEY OF THE WIND, Japanimation giant Hayao Miyazaki is an artist of painterly sensibilities and consummate compassion. Whether dealing with cautionary ecological themes or benevolent trolls, Miyazaki's films are rich, innocent, gentle tales. CASTLE OF CAGLIOSTRO, one of the director's "Lupin the III" series, is strictly fluff, but it's fun-filled action-slapstick on a grand scale. Based on the comic *manga* created by Japanese author Monkey Punch, the film reads like Hitchcock's TO CATCH A THIEF by way of Disney. The fast-paced, boisterous story has slickster thief Lupin ("The Wolf") tracing the source of the counterfeit bills that have blown his latest heist. Tracking the money to the country of Cagliostro, the criminal soon finds himself battling to save a beautiful princess from an evil duke.

With tons of revved-up incident, memorable characters, and the trademark sumptuous Miyazaki backgrounds, CAGLIOSTRO is furious, non-stop enjoyment. From the gallant Lupin to his winning sidekicks, a hard-drinking marksman and a stoic samurai, the cel-crew are a winning lot. Along with the various hair-breadth escapes, gun fights, ninja battles, air attacks, and pratfalls, the film boasts a clock-tower finale that's a doozy. As much concerned with concepts of chivalry and loyalty as a high-octane larceny, the movie is a delight. Previously shown at festivals in a subtitled version, Streamline's video features fine dubbing.

FIST OF THE NORTH STAR ○

Director: Toyoo Ashida. A Toei Animation Co. Production, 1986/1992, 110 mins.

Silly, incomprehensible, comic-gratuitous, brain-blowing epic is like a combo of MAD MAX films and STREET FIGHTER video games, garnished with heaping doses



Combining sex and violence is almost *de rigeur* in anime, as with the lovely but lethal spider lady in WICKED CITY, an interdimensional shapeshifter from the parallel Black World.

of Sergio Leone and chop-socky flicks. In the wake of a nuclear holocaust, remnants of humanity battle in a lawless wasteland against marauding raiders and mutant demi-gods. Their only hope is a race of enlightened super-human warriors, chief among whom are the Fist of the North Star and Fist of the South Star. Ken, the current North Star, must overcome renegade spiritual brethren Shin and Jagi while questing for his kidnapped love, Julia. Meanwhile, Ken's very unenlightened older bro, Rach, appropriating Ken's status, embarks on world conquest with an inevitable climactic duel deciding the fate of Julia and the wounded planet. Edited into a film from a 200-some part TV series, the movie is mainly a series of unbelievably gory hand-to-hand show-downs between ill-defined characters. Folks either get blown apart (North Star technique) or sliced-and-diced (Southern Star style), with smatterings of trite mysticism thrown into the proceedings ("Power without perception is spiritually useless," quotes one sage). Film is further hampered by flat and immobile animation style, confusing storyline, occasionally incongruent dubbing, and a chief villain's not-too convincing last-minute change of heart. Visual equivalent of having to go back to high school and reread only the battle scenes from "The Song of Roland." For gore and hard-core anime buffs only.

LENSMAN ★★

Director: Yoshiaki Kawajiri & K. Hirokawa. An MK Company Production, 1986/1990, 107 mins.

A boy on a backwater planet dreams of joining an honorable rebel elite and taking on an evil galactic empire.

Nope, it's not STAR WARS but the enjoyable though slightly derivative LENSMAN, the anime adaptation of E.E. "Doc" Smith's famous space opera novels. An often dazzling blend of conventional and computer animation, the film tells the tale of Kim, a space jockey eager to join the Galactic patrol in its fight against the evil domination of the cosmos by the Boskone Empire. When Kim is chosen to become a member of a secret order of inter-planetary freedom fighters called "Lensmen" (after the power-enhancing alien artifact grafted onto their wrists), all the tried-and-true sci-fi staples occur (except for the cloying droid play), but the inclusion of diverting computer graphics (mainly in the numerous dog fights and the devilish Lord Helmet's appearances) are an unexpected plus. Lots of selfless derring-do, battle set-pieces, oddball characters (including a septuagenarian D.J. rebel), and hair-breadth escapes make this good fun. Favorite part: Kim and his comrades collide with nasty, decadent, drug-addicted snails! Good dubbing and sound; a laser disc version with the original Japanese on a second soundtrack is also available.

THE PROFESSIONAL (GOLGOL 13) ★★★★★

Director: Osami Dezaki. Script: Hideyoshi Nagasaka, based on graphic novels by Takeo Saito. A Tokyo Movie Shinsha Production, 1983/1993, 70 mins.

This nihilistic Nippon assassin flick is an anime masterpiece, albeit a very downbeat one. Tweaking the conventions of the existential killer-for-hire genre, Dezaki's film plays ingenious riffs on its material, taking surprising twists and turns at every point. The film's eponymous loner

anti-hero Golgo 13 (a.k.a. Duke Togo) is a super-cool killer who resembles Mr. Spock on steroids. When he sanctions the son of a ruthless oil magnate, the latter responds by using his financial clout to dispatch scads of government hit-squads and a trio of memorably monstrous killers on the Professional's trail. Combining conventional cel-work with computer animation, the climactic showdown in the oil baron's high-tech office fortress goes over like gangbusters—thanks to the baroque gore quotient and a finale that stands all pat action cliches on their heads.

Indicative of Dezaki and Nagasaki's take on the futility of violence, revenge, and the further carnage it engenders is the way in which they foil the expected pay-offs: as when the hit-man's loyal flunky gives him the run-down on his enemy's plans before he reluctantly tries to collect on the bounty. The cel-work is dazzling, at times even poetic: a shore-side shooting with enough swooping gulls for a John Woo film; an extreme close-up of a bullet plowing into a victim's brain, etc. The set-pieces, including a duel in an ascending elevator and Togo's kiss-off of the billionaire are superb. The latter, a direct lift from (or homage to) the ending of ROBOCOP, has Togo blow away his victim into a swan-dive out of a skyscraper window. In spite of the balletic, slo-mo lashings of blood, it's hard to think of any film in the medium—or many live-action ones—that grapple (under the guise of escapism) with the utter waste underlying the spuma of slaughter. Like UNFORGIVEN and BULLET IN THE HEAD, this is a beautiful but unlovely film, and the final

ironic, abrupt shot on a rain-swept night street says it all.

ROBOT CARNIVAL ★★

Directors: Fukushima & Katsuhiro Otomo Otomo ("Opening/Closing"), Hiroyuki Kitazume ("Starlight Angel"), Mao Lamdo ("Clouds"), Hiroyuki Kitahudo ("A Tale of Two Robots"), Kouji Morimoto ("Franken's Gear"), Hideotoshi Ohmori ("Deprive"), Yasuomi Umetsu ("Presence"), Takashi Nakamura ("Nightmare"). An A.P.P. Co. Production, 1987/1991, 97 mins.

Like many anthology-format features, this is a mixed bag. Adopting a "Man against (or in love with) Machine" theme, the film is filled with genial but inconsequential mech-mate soap opera fluff ("Starlight Angel," "Deprive") and, content-wise, is too wispy and diffuse to really sustain extended interest. However, the feature does contain two superb episodes: the wraparound segs by AKIRA creator Katsuhiro Otomo, which have the Robot Carnival descending on a futuristic desert burg; and Yasuomi Umetsu's enchanting and totally moving "Presence." The latter tale, about an inventor's initial inability to cope with the very human feelings with which he has—unwittingly—endowed his beautiful android, is an affecting meditation on unrequited love and responsibility. The Umetsu episode also scores some gentle and knowing satiric jabs at Nippon anime for its penchant for relegating its cyborg femmes to the role of pliable sex-toys ("I'm not a pet," the inventor's creation protests). With its understated mood and atmosphere, "Presence" scores well above the rest of ROBOT CARNIVAL's metal *sturm-und-drang*. Kudos should also go to Hiroyuki Kitahudo's "A Tale of Two Robots," which amusingly transplants all the cliches of the mecha genre to an 18th-century Japanese setting.

Since most of the episodes are non-dialogue, the laser disc featuring alternate Japanese and English tracks is mostly a moot point, although an amusing element of the "Two Robots" sequence is that its foreign (apparently European) villain always spoke English, even in the original Japanese version.

TWILIGHT OF THE COCKROACHES ★★★★★

Director-writer: Hiroaki Yoshida. A TYO Productions Inc./Kitty Films Inc. Production, 102 mins. 1987/1990.

A spell-binding combo of cartooning and live action, TWILIGHT OF THE COCKROACHES is a mordant, serio-comic allegory of the Holocaust and one of the single most thought-provoking works in the anime field. This consistently moving film tells the story of a sybaritic roach tribe which has found bliss in the bachelor pad of the incredibly slovenly Saito. Meanwhile, young femme

roach Naomi becomes increasingly bored with the pampered paradise and her staid mate Ichiro. When brave soldier roach Hans arrives on the scene via the "war-torn" house across the yard, Naomi finds herself falling for the stranger, who also provides the complacent tribe with a first-hand report of his race's struggle for survival. When the lonely Saito eventually hooks up with the insect-offing girl across the way, the two embark on a roach genocide spree, and the tribes unite for a last-ditch suicidal attack on the human lovers. Imaginative and involving, TWILIGHT manages to conjure fairly substantial simpatico for the household bane, and the last third takes on tragic dimensions when the couple goes on the war-path. A solid work of *cinéfantastique*.

Unlike most Streamline films, this was distributed theatrically in a subtitled print (which is still available on laser disc). "The human characters don't speak, and the cockroaches speak in Japanese, so subtitles almost make it seem like cockroach language, in a funny way," explains Macek. "It's like Jabba the Hut in STAR WARS, talking in subtitles." Videocassette features fine dubbing.

VAMPIRE HUNTER D ★★★

Director: Toyoo Ashida. Epic/Sony Inc., 1985/1992, 80 mins.

Imaginative science-fiction, gothic-horror actioner reads like a macabre variation on SHANE. In A.D. 12,090, last vestiges of humanity are ruled in feudal fashion by despotic vampiric overlords and their mutant flunkies. Comely villager Doris offers herself to the mysterious sword-wielding vampire hunter "D"—himself a dhampire (i.e., a living demi-vamp crossbreed whose powers match those of his undead opponents)—in exchange for slaying tyrannical local nosferatu Count Magnus Lee. When Doris is chosen to become the vampire's bride, D makes a lone assault on the count's demon-infested stronghold. Melding classic horror, science-fiction, western, and samurai motifs, the movie provides plenty of thrills and off-beat bits of characterization, with the laconic D coming across as a combo of Sanjuro, Captain Kronos, and Robert E. Howard's puritan avenger, Solomon Kane. Among the memorably bizarre touches: the monster-be-gone Coleman lanterns that work on the undead populace, and D's wise-cracking, sentient hand, which (a la OUTER LIMITS's "Demon with a Glass Hand" episode) revives him from death. The creepy-crawlies, including a missile-armed giant and trio of serpent lamia sisters, are nicely realized.



Another staple of anime are buxom leading ladies, usually in tight-fitting spiffy space outfits. **AFFAIR ON NOLANDIA**, one of the **DIRTY PAIR** series, is one example of this popular form.

Smartly directed by FIST OF THE NORTH STAR's Toyoo Ashida, the film also boasts an effective, moody score by TM Network. On the negative side, the dubbing by Streamline is erratic, with the voice for Count Magnus being the worst offender, and the annoyingly processed nasal tones given to the hand are no match for the deep, sardonic voice of the original. On the whole, splendid stuff, but seeing it on the big screen, where it was shown in a subtitled print, is definitely preferable.

WICKED CITY ★★★

Director: Yoshiaki Kawajiri. Writer: Kisei Choo, based on the novel by Hideyuki Kikuchi. A Japan Home Video Production, 1989/1994, 80 mins.

For untrammelled visual chutzpah, it's hard to top anime director Kawajiri's future-goth noir thriller. This lean, adult horror entry comes across like a weird bonding of John Carpenter's THING and every cop-buddy film you've ever seen. The story's premise is that over the last 500 years, humankind has co-existed (fairly) peaceably with the interdimensional shape-shifting populace of the parallel Black World. With monstrous transdimensional terrorists out to smash the treaty as it's up for re-ratification, moderates on both sides pair up tough-guy cop Taki Renzaburo and Black World agent Makia in a bid to halt the baddies before time runs out.

From the first erotic-violent set-piece in which a Black World succubus-spiderwoman scampers after Taki (yet manages to maintain garters and stockings with aplomb), the film propels itself with non-stop imagistic verve. Some of the cels are nothing less than galvanizing, as when scores of blood-red tentacles burst from

a marble-white statue of the Virgin Mary during a duel in a church. As shown in DEMON CITY SHINJUKI, Kawajiri is a master at portraying a haunted megalopolis in which mortals and monsters live in blood-lashed—and often cynically rueful—co-existence. A superb bonding of Nippon themes of kinetic carnage and co-operation, WICKED CITY rates as one of the all-time champs of grotesque anime.

This is one of Streamline's better dubbing jobs: perfectly suited to the film noir look of the images is the hard-boiled tone of the English dialogue, written and directed by Greg Snegoff, who also voices Taki.

WINDARIA ★★★

Director: Kunohiko Yuyama. An IDOL Co. Presentation, 1986/1992, 95 mins.

Beguiling, often pointed Nippon anti-war fantasia. On the fabled pastoral world of Windaria, two mythical kingdoms, the militaristic Shadowlands and the less-tech sea-side realm of Lunaria, are headed for inevitable clash over latter's monopoly on fresh water. Seeking to thwart the jingoistic saber-rattling of their parents, royal heirs and embattled lovers Prince Roland and Princess Veronica instead find themselves eventually inheriting upcoming conflict after the untimely deaths of their elders. Also embroiled in the war are young bucolic couple Alan and Marie, whose valley society is encroached upon by both factions. When Alan acts as go-between for the royal kinder, he's duped by Shadowland gentry into becoming the catalyst for the tragedy that rocks both realms. Despite obvious cinematic refs to everything from DUNE's dynastic wars over melange and water rights to ROMEO

AND JULIET, the movie works as both anti-war bromide and bittersweet love story, aided by strong characterizations, solid animation, and emphasis on adult themes of loyalty, greed, and betrayal. Occasional framing narration (via the dying, repentant Alan) is sometimes intrusive, but elemental concerns of harmony and co-existence make this one of the better realized pieces of feature anime. Streamline dubbing is generally fine.

FEATURETTES

DIRTY PAIR: AFFAIR ON NOLANDIA ★★

Director: Naahara Okuwaki. A Studio/Nue Sunrise/NTV Production, 1985/1992, 57 mins.

Adapted from Haruka Takachicho's comic *manga*, AFFAIR ON NOLANDIA pits the trouble-shooting interstellar spit-fires Kei and Yuri in a mission to save a child psionic from exploitation by a power-mad villain out to breed a line of subservient psycho-kinetic slaves from the girl. Landing on Nolandia, the curvy agents find themselves not only dodging death and sabotage from the enemy but enduring psychic onslaught from the frightened child. Sexy and moderately exciting space opera fluff occasionally suffers from now-dated, primitive animation, but still manages to be fun and diverting. Anime fans of the bosomy, super-destructive space sleuths will enjoy this combo of pulchritude and action. Good dubbing. Other Streamline DIRTY PAIR OVA releases include PROJECT EDEN and CONSPIRACY OF FLIGHT 005.

NEO-TOKYO ★★★

Directors: Rin Taro ("Labyrinth"), Yoshiaki Kawajiri ("Running Man"), Katsuhiro Otomo ("The Order to Stop Construction"). Haruki Kadokawa Films, 1986/1993, approx. length 50 mins.

An anime omnibus produced in 1987 for the Tokyo International Fantastic Film Festival, NEO-TOKYO (originally dubbed MANIE-MANIE, or "Tales from the Labyrinth") avoids the pitfalls of most genre anthology flicks by not peaking early but saving its best seg for last. A trio of science-fiction and fantasy tales ranging in length from 12 to 23 minutes, the film effortlessly aces shifts from tone poem wistfulness to cyber-punk grue. "Labyrinth," Taro's episode, which doubles as the movie's framing device, follows the "Through the Looking Glass"-style adventures of a young girl and her cat as they are led through surreal and disturbing dreamscapes by a sinister clown. Kawajiri's segment, "Running Man," is a meld of Chanderesque pulp noir and ferocious cyber-splatterpunk. Set in the 21st century, when race-car drivers are now psionically "plugged" into their vehicles, story revolves around a hard-bitten reporter's attempts to get the scoop on the longevity of Zach Hughes, the last decade's Death Race champ. "The Order to Stop Construction," Otomo's offering, is a pitch-black comic melding of Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness" and Kubrick's 2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY. A young bureaucrat, sent up-river to investigate his predecessor's disappearance and pull the plug on a building project in the jungle, finds himself the only human on the site, locked in conflict with the project's (short-circuiting) robot foreman, who's determined to finish his objective at any cost.

With surreal images of streetcars filled with irradiated, skeletal commuters and clock-headed "salarymen," Taro's seg is basically an innocence vs. experience meditation, its power somewhat lessened by its use as a bridging device for the other episodes. Kawajiri's "Running Man" (seen in an edited version on MTV's LIQUID TELEVISION) is a lean and stark technological terror tale providing mordant commentary on our own society's media-fed bread-and-circus morbidity. But the Otomo episode is easily NEO-TOKYO's most stunningly sustained achievement and one of anime's best and bleakest dystopic visions. A perfect balance between horror and humor (as things worsen, the snotty supervisor's meals wind up with escalating doses of scrap-metal "seasoning").



The splendid **VAMPIRE HUNTER D** cleverly combines Gothic and sci-fi elements with a loner protagonist worthy of Clint Eastwood.

ture of elements as disparate as Jules Verne, space opera, and cliff-hanger serials. All in all, there are over 60 titles available for sale through their mail order catalogue (including some vintage 1950s' British animation such as **CLUTCH CARGO**); and some of their more prominent features are now available to be rented on store shelves, courtesy of a new deal with Orion.

NORTH STAR, **THE PROFESSIONAL: GOLGO 13**, and **VAMPIRE HUNTER D**, all in 1992. **SILENT MOBIUS** and **NEO TOKYO** enjoyed a spring run in 1993 at the Los Angeles Nuart theatre, and Streamline wares received widespread coverage in a 1994 festival at the Santa Monica Laemmle Four, which culminated with the premiere of **WICKED CITY**.

Though originally only in the business of theatrical distribution, Streamline has recently packaged a number of popular TV anime serials and Original Video Animation (OVA). Macek recently came out with the complete **ROBOTECH** product line, released in two versions: the "consumer edition" features all 85 uncut episodes as they were aired on American television; the "connoisseur edition" includes the English versions paired with the original Japanese episodes, with subtitles. Streamline has also acquired mini-series such as **DOOMED MEGALOPOLIS**, **CRYING FREEMAN**, and **3X3 EYES**, (the later a story of battling immortals, "replete with guns, girls, and grotesque monsters"). Streamline is also releasing the first several episodes of the phenomenally popular **NADIA: SECRET OF BLUE WATER**, a terrific mix-

Besides wider availability, the other advantage of Streamline is that audiences can at last understand the plots, thanks to English dubbing, whereas the laserdiscs bought by fans in the old days tended to be unsubtitled Japanese imports (which resulted in a subsidiary industry supplying translated scripts). This is something of a double-edged sword, however, creating an interesting dilemma for Macek and Beck: Japanese producers had long been interested in dubbing for the American market, but American fans were seldom if ever satisfied with the English-language versions. It was as if not understanding the dialogue added an extra level of mystique, which was often dispelled by the prosaic dialogue of careless translations.

"The Japanese companies got involved with dubbing companies that gave low bids and did bad work, giving a bad im-



age to the product," explains Macek. In a separate interview, Beck adds, "We were not happy with the **LAPUTA** English version ourselves, but the **AKIRA** is a better job, and I think the fact that they were on the big screen overwhelmed the weaknesses. We wanted to dub films not just faithfully but also give a complete English reflection of what the Japanese version is."

Despite Streamline's attempts to do a better job with their in-house translations of post-**AKIRA** releases, not everyone is satisfied. In fact, the quality of dubbing seems to be almost irrelevant to hardcore fans, who consider the issue a matter of principle: just as an artist is considered to have sold out when he tailors his art for wider acceptance, the dubbed versions were perceived as impure degradations of the originals, even by people who can't speak Japanese!

Macek disputes this view. "All cartoons are dubbed," he laughs. "Cartoon characters don't talk. Dubbing is not a sign of disrespect. If you're watching some Japanese

monster flick, the dialogue really isn't that profound anyway to require truly literal, painstaking translation. Other than for educational purposes, I really can't see the reason for subtitling."

In the Winter 1994 issue of *World of Fandom*, the Streamline president offered his own reflections on criticism that his commercial-mindedness has resulted in his playing fast-and-loose with fan-beloved anime works: "Well, we're talking about two different kinds of fans here," Macek said. "Streamline is out to please what you might call the counterculture, the **REN AND STIMPY** crowd, which is not the same as the fans who have gotten so far into Japanese animation that they're studying the total Japanese culture. They want all their movies and tapes subtitled, in detail, so they won't miss the slightest nuances in the original Japanese language. This is fine from an academic angle, but the general public simply will not be bothered to read subtitles! You can't please everybody, and I've chosen to

OUTRAGEOUS ANIMAE

TO DUB OR NOT TO DUB

The purists want subtitles, but the average viewer prefers English.

By Todd French

Forget about critical nitpicking for a moment. What do average viewers want when perusing a piece of Japanese animation? Tom Stewart, owner of Super Collector, a Southern California-based comic book and video store that is the biggest distributor of Japanimation in the Orange County area, offers his perspective on fan demand for subtitled versus dubbed product.

"There are two different areas of customers in the Japanimation world," says Stewart, whose Fountain Valley store includes 1,000 anime titles, 80 per cent of which are stocked at a given time. "You've got the hard-core anime fans who think that any kind of dubbing is just blasphemy, and will accept nothing less than a subtitled video. You also have the 'Blockbuster Video' type, who is probably looking at this stuff for the first time, and wants it in English. I tend to feel you can appeal to a wider market with a dubbed video than a subtitled video, and in the end you'll wind up selling more dubbed copies. I would say that we're about equal on sales [either dubbed or subtitled], but I know for a fact that dubbed videos do much better in regular stores that don't cater to the hard-core anime fan."

Stewart, an avowed ROBO-TECH addict from the '80s, worked for a Newport Beach Japanese import company, Digital Waves, from 1989 to 1992, before opening Super Collector in December of 1993. Ready access to Japanimation titles at Digital Waves led to Stewart's being wowed by the genre-bending content of many of the Digital-carried titles and resulted in his desire to found Super Collec-



In a rare move sure to please fans, Streamline released a subtitled version of AKIRA in addition to the usual dubbed version.

tor. The store currently carries titles from such top-notch distributors as Streamline, Central Park Media, AnimEigo, A.D. Vision, and Dark Image Entertainment, to name a few. Some of the Streamline product, which are among Super Collector's "hottest titles," include FIST OF THE NORTH STAR, the ROBO-TECH "Perfect Collection," and THE DIRTY PAIR series.

A frequent anime staple on the fan-con circuit, Stewart breaks down the shifting economic demographics of fan interest, ranging from convention specialties, as follows: "At an animation con, 90 per cent of the people are going to want subtitled, and only ten per cent will want dubbed. You get more of the hard-core fans in one

place than a retail store or a mail-order catalog distributing them through Video Giant.

"However, if I went to a STAR TREK convention I'd probably bring mainly dubbed anime titles because most of the fans will be experiencing Japanimation for the first time or maybe second or third, so they will want the dubbed product. If I were going to AnimeExpo or AnimeAmerica [both annual summer West Coast anime cons], I would bring mainly subtitled items for the exact opposite reasons, because the audience has been exposed to anime for many years. In passing, I'd say that, in the last two years, over 400 new titles have come out in America. Before that, there were probably only two or three distributors that carried Japanimation; now there are over 10."

On the subject of viewer-content demand, Stewart admits that the Super Collector videophile probably tends toward "the more violent or explicit material. We probably sell that material 2-to-1 over the more family-oriented stuff, though some of that really does sell well: DRAGONBALL Z, for instance. Our best-selling titles would probably include the UROTSUKI-DOJI [a.k.a. WANDERING KID] series, as well as the GUY series from A.D. Visions, which has proven to be one of the more explicit things ever released. We also import a lot of strictly Japanese titles like MONSTER CLASSROOM, and L.A. BLUE GIRL to name a few."

So there you have it. Clearly, the only way to please all of the people all of the time is to make both subtitled and dubbed anime available to viewers. As they say, the customer is always right. □

the story's ultra-dark man vs. machine themes reach an epiphanic climax that's sheer perfection. The poetic, compressed narrative approach of these episodes requires relatively minimal dialogue, resulting in an easier-than-usual dubbing job for Streamline, who acquit themselves quite nicely.

SILENT MOBIUS ★★★

Director: Michitaka Kikuchi. A Kadokawa Publishing Co. Production, 1991/1993, approx. 50 mins.

In the 21st Century, humanity is besieged by trans-dimensional predators led by monstrous Lucifer Hawke. The only hope lies with a bevy of beautiful psionic cops, who combine modern police procedure with arcane fire-power to halt the otherworldly threat. When they discover that lovely Katsumi has become the focus of Hawke's personal ire due to her nascent psychic gifts, the officers induct her into their ranks for the occult fight to the finish. Based on the popular *manga* by Kia Asamiya, the film delivers the goods despite confusing flashback structure. Diverting enough, even though reminiscent of "CHARLIE'S ANGELES Meets ALIENS." One problem: heroines are pretty much interchangeable, thanks to near-identical design of pointy, triangular features. Adequate but uninspired dubbing.

OVA SERIES

CRYING FREEMAN VOLUME 1 ★★★

Director: Daisuke Nishio. Toei Video, 1986/1992, approx. 50 mins.

Adapted from the 1989 *manga* of writer Kazuo Koike (LONE WOLF AND CUB) and artist Ryoichi Ikeyami (MAI, THE PSYCHIC GIRL), this is the first of five Toei-produced anime OVAs by director Daisuke Nishio. A rather flat and stilted style is overcome by compelling storytelling of an over-powering love saga. Emu Himo, a talented (and virginal) young artist witnesses the violent sanction of a Yakuza member by the Chinese mafia hit-man, "Freeman." Once a critically lauded potter, Yo Hinomura became the brainwashed tool of the infamous 108 Dragons after stumbling across some photos of a gang killing. The premier assassin of the Dragons, and unwilling heir apparent to the gang's throne, Yo is dubbed "Crying Freeman" for the tears he weeps after every murder he commits against his will. When the Dragons dispatch Freeman to kill the beautiful Himo (who has fallen in love with him), she begs him to take her virginity first. As a result of the union, Freeman and his former target pledge eternal love and set out to thwart various foes, including the Yakuza and police.

Though the series lacks the kind of visual verve and passion of Ikeyami's original drawings (*manga* is currently being serialized by Viz Premiere Comics), there's no denying the power of simpatoco between Emu and Freeman. This is due in no small part to the otherwise ambiguous amorality of the brutal pulp-meller world opposing them (major cop Nitta and the Yakuza literally wind up "in bed" with each other). Imaginative scenes abound: an in-the-air, slo-mo track with Freeman as



FIST OF THE NORTH STAR, basis of an upcoming live-action film, multiplies the violence to an occasionally amusing but mostly ludicrous quotient.

he blows away a police-guarded Yakuza boss; the "rape" of Freeman's psyche as he's riddled with the acupuncture needle-relayed orders of the 108 Dragons. One complaint which will surface in later episodes: Yo's struggle out of mafia bondage is compromised somewhat in that the 108 Dragons only wipe out other thugs, often with agendas more detestable than theirs (hey, the 108 Dragons even turn out to be a grandma and grandpa-led concern). Nevertheless, the love and bullets scenario is never less than commanding, and the down-beat, joyless attitude towards violence is indicative of the hit-man's tragic, lachrymose mood.

A note: as has been pointed out in an earlier article by *Video Watchdog* editor Tim Lucas, the character of Emu Himo is a dead-ringer for actress Jennifer Connolly (who has a popular following in Japan), so the series is a must for her enthusiasts everywhere.

Dubbing and stereo sound are fine. The first OVA covers the initial nine *manga* issues.

**VOLUME 2:
"SHADES OF DEATH,"
PART ONE** ★★★

Director: Daisuke Nishio. Toei Video, 1988/1992, approx. 50 mins.

The second Nishio-directed OVA in the *CRYING FREEMAN* saga, "Shades of Death" (Part 1) is a worthy follow-up to its predecessor and, in some respects, proves to be even better. With Yo and Emu growing into their respective destinies as leader and consort of the 108 Dragons, the OVA's plot revolves around the couple being targeted by would-be usurpers in the organization, and Freeman's duel with beautiful, black assassin Kitsch. The lethal and imaginative face-offs—Yo excises his targets with knives between his toes, while Kitsch favors an electrified armor-corset—are all vivid and memorable. Scenes of the inner-workings of the Dragons are especially fascinating (like the desert mutants in *HILLS HAVE EYES*, the mafia chiefs are named after heavenly bodies), and with the introduction of the Felliniesque gargantuan granddaughter of the elderly

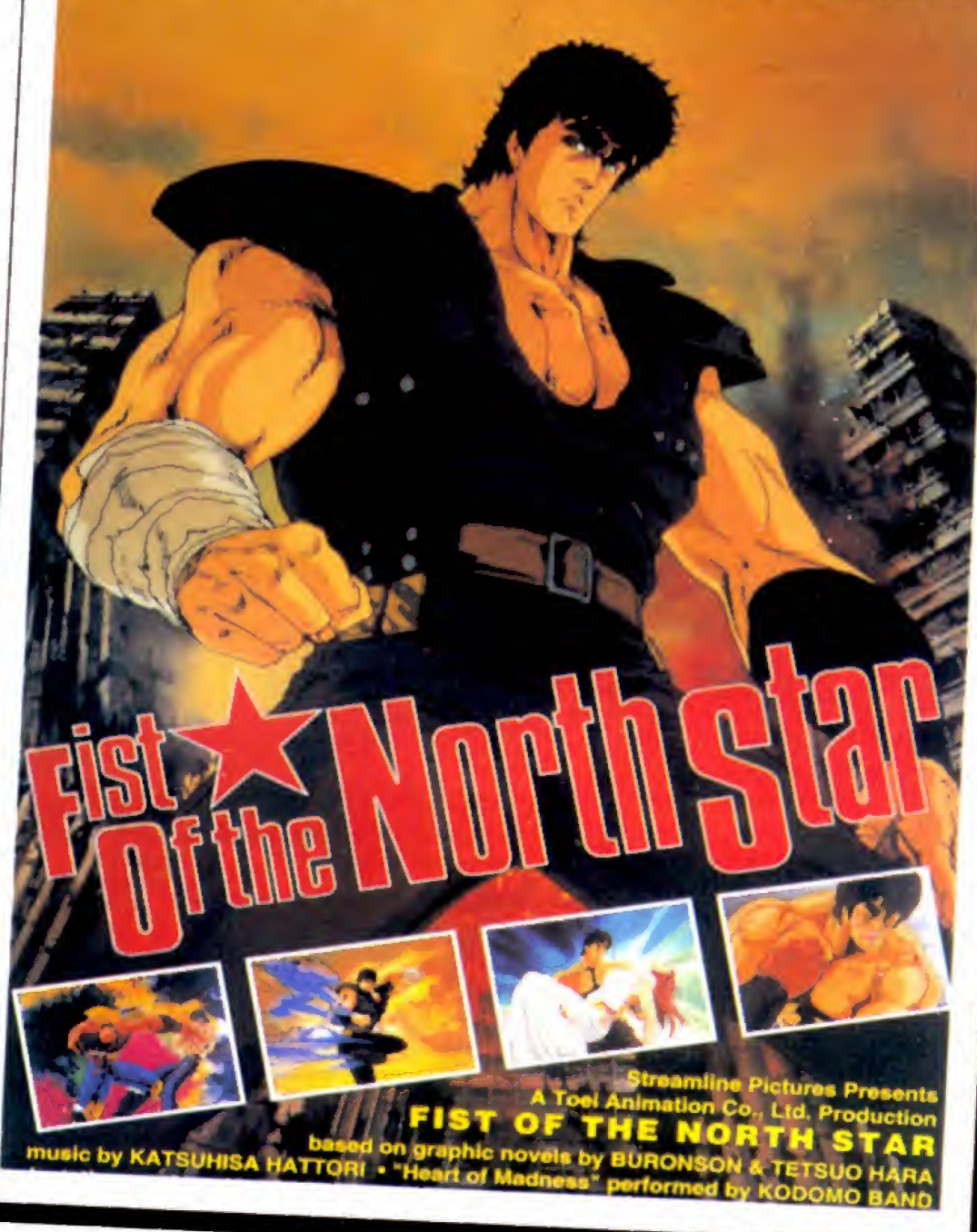
gang heads, a subtext of familial reconciliation and responsibility abounds in the first half. Though emphasis on Yo's down-beat predicament seems to fall by the wayside as he and Emu take their places at the top of the criminal power-heap, the two remain appealing figures, and the plot's crammed with decidedly Asian concepts of personal honor and sacrifice (as exemplified by Freeman's right-hand man, Koh), ironically set against the contest of an all-pervasive, crime-riddled universe which would make Dr. Mabuse envious. There are a few eyebrow-raising moments, as when the black Kitsch uses a white pigment spray to disguise herself and evade Dragon hoods dispatched to kill her. (Given Japan's world-renowned xenophobia, there's a disturbing racist undercurrent here that will resurface in #3 to a more obvious degree). In spite of the usual limited character movement, individual scenes remain dazzling: assassin Kitsch's slow-mo, knife-wielding pirouette in the midst of a climactic nighttime duel on the deck of the 108 Dragon submarine packs the kind of grandiloquent eros-thanatos wallop on which anime dotes. The Streamline dubbing, image, and sound quality are all first-rate.

**VOLUME 3:
"SHADES OF DEATH,"
PART TWO** ★

Director: Johel Matsuro. Toei Video, 1988/1993, approx. 50 mins.

The third anime OVA featuring the reluctant assassin with the over-worked tear ducts falls short of previous episodes. Though technical credits are superb, the main plot, with 108 Dragon head Freeman smashing a black terrorist organization queasily smacks of the sort of racist xenophobia for which the Japanese are famous. An interesting subplot has Emu mastering an evil samurai sword, the Muramasa, in an attempt to shield her husband from the baneful blade, which has been sent to the Dragons in the hope of putting a lethal hex on the lachrymose killer. As usual, the action soars whenever the relationship between Freeman and Emu takes center-stage (though a test of her love makes Arnie's hazing of Jamie Lee

AN EPIC ASSAULT ON THE SENSES



try to please the general public rather than the Japanese anime purists. It's probably more important to wake up the public to the basic fact that there's lots of good stuff in Japanese animation, rather than to try to persuade them to look at a cartoon with subtitles and footnotes to explain all the Japanese pop-cultural references."

Dubbing controversy aside, Macek is not only extremely proud of Streamline's role as a force for popularizing Japanimation for the general public; he also lauds his company's efforts in pioneering sound-effects enhancement on their anime products. This ties in to one of the problems that bedevils imported Japanimation products: dialogue and effects are generally "wedded" onto the same tracks, instead of being separated on different tracks, which makes transference exceptionally difficult.

Says Macek, "A problem is that a lot of studios don't have the sophisticated backup ma-

terial. When Japanimation is sold to a foreign market, you find that the music and effects are wedded on right and left tracks. The best reality would be having two tracks for effects and two for dialogue—you don't often get optimum material. If the foley is too loud, you have to lower it, and the ambient sound gets lowered since they're married. We add sound effects and try to enhance the soundtrack to take advantage of the ambient sound. We'll add wind effects, night air, film techniques, to increase the sound of the foley as it's married to effects. In *DOOMED MEGALOPOLIS*, there's a sound *leitmotif* for each character, for effects of psychological motivation. We utilize state-of-the-art techniques to suspend disbelief and to add ambience and perspective. Most cartoons are flat. In our films, you can tell whose mouth the sound is coming from."

In addition to distributing Japanimation, one of Streamline's other recent projects is a

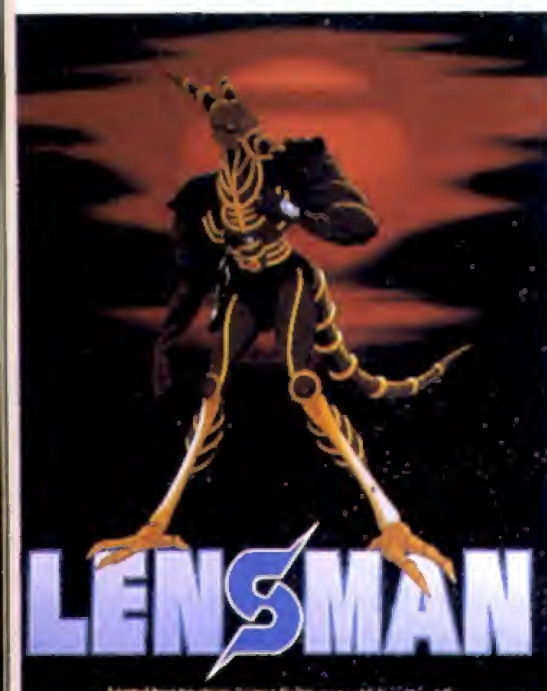
Curtis in TRUE LIES look fairly tame in comparison); and a scene near the end in which Emu executes a nude sword ritual to entrance a bunch of thugs and summon Freeman has a true erotic charge. But there is a disturbingly bigoted bent to a scene in which our Occidental-looking Japanese superman dominates black amazon terrorist Bugnug. The self-sacrificing Emu's heroics aside, Freeman's face-offs with terrorist leaders Jigon and Shikebaro seem perfunctory compared to the imaginative slayings in the previous two episodes. Recommended for the compelling romance between the protagonists. Streamline's dubbing and sound still rate fairly high.

VOLUME 4: "A TASTE OF REVENGE" ★★

Director: Shigeyasu Yamauchi. Toei Video, 1988/1994, approx. 50 mins.

Latest OVA in the popular crime-meller saga has Freeman challenged by Naitai, a fanatical religious out to use the 108 Dragons' influence to spread his Great Bear God cult throughout the world. His plan includes use of superhuman world wrestling champ Oshu Togoku to depose Freeman so they can substitute a cult clone who will take his place as the crime cartel's head. This volume may not duplicate the combo of romance, violence, and pathos from the first two OVAs, but there's plenty to enjoy. What makes the fourth episode absorbing is the inclusion of the Togoku character, a sociopathic but honorable—and orphaned—ogre who yearns as much for family as he does for the destruction of Freeman, his rival in martial arts prowess. In the OVA's climactic duel, the latter manages to take on a tragic dignity and you wish there had been more action with him. Otherwise, the same level of exciting and violent excisions are on hand, though Great Bear God baddie Naitai winds up

The space opera **LENSMAN** mixed traditional cel work with computer animation.



ROBOTECH: THE SENTINELS is a feature-length sequel to the popular **ROBOTECH** series, now offered in a collector's edition featuring the dubbed versions and the originals.

posing about as much threat as the rest of the reluctant assassin's enemies. (If he has enough supernatural power to render the Dragons unconscious, why can't he stop a lethal sword stroke from Fu Ching Lan's Muramasa?) Some nice touches include Freeman's enemies gradually being dumped onto the spines of a cartel's dragon statue. The usual solid dubbing.

DOOMED MEGALOPOLIS VOL 1: "THE HAUNTING OF TOKYO" ★★

Director: Rin Taro. A Toei Video and Oz Production, 1992/1993, approx. 50 mins.

The burgeoning 1920s metropolis of Tokyo is under supernatural siege as ruthless necromancer Kato attempts to raise the city's slumbering guardian spirit, Taira No Masakado. Visually impressive but senseless first chapter is light on character development and story subtlety, but it delivers the goods with a surfeit of sorcery duels and demon-mongering as unlikely heroes stand up to the (significantly militaristic) Kato, who attempts to use virginal girl Yukari in his nefarious plot to summon Nasakado's ambivalently defined ghost. (Guy's only his city's deliverer when he's sleeping under the turf?) The animation's pretty simplistic and stilted, but pace never lets up, and Streamline stereo sound helps greatly.

VOL 2: "THE FALL OF TOKYO" ★★

Director: Rin Taro. A Toei Video and Oz Production, 1992/1993, approx. 50 mins.

Stymied by failure to wreak vengeance on newly renovated Tokyo and unable to effect resurrection of guardian spirit Masakado as his supernatural flunky, sorcerer Kato

psychically rapes virginal Ukari (the physical act completed by her possessed brother) in the hopes his subsequent offspring, female child Ukiko, will give him access to Masakado's dormant power. Second OVA in anime vet Rin Taro's period horror series is crammed with visual inventiveness, never stinting on fast and furious occult set-pieces. The general atmosphere of Nippon fatalism and the bleak vision of a world where absolutes such as good and evil can, at best, hope for an eternal see-sawing draw is rather mesmerizing and unique. Having the municipal government accept the existence of the supernatural is also quite novel. It lacks the apocalyptic poetry of UROTSUKI-DOJI or the compelling scares of WICKED CITY, but the series is still good horrific fare.

VOL 3: "THE GODS OF TOKYO" ★★

VOL 4: "THE BATTLE FOR TOKYO" ★★

Director: Rin Taro. A Toei Video and Oz Production, 1992/1993, approx. 47 mins.

The Battle for Tokyo's arcane soul concludes in episodes 3 and 4 of Rin Taro's horror anime epic. Though apparently defeated in "Fall of Tokyo," installment 3 has the newly risen Kato scheming to use the subway system construction project to wake a supernatural dragon that slumbers beneath the city. By unleashing the dragon, Kato hopes he finally will be able to gain control of the city's guardian spirit, Masakado. Called in by the authorities to investigate, Prof. Terada and psychic Kuroda build a robot (inspired by the release of METROPOLIS!) to foil Kato's

mission. Meanwhile, Masakado's champion, the chaste Shinto priestess Keiko has married into the doom-laden Tatsumiya family to protect Ukiko from the sorcerer's machinations. In "The Battle for Tokyo," the ever-thwarted Kato uses Ukiko as a vessel to solve a mathematical equation which will set the moon on a crash course with the Earth! Taking advantage of the mass destruction (to put it lightly), Kato will finally achieve his long, sought-after revenge. As the supernatural nexus of the storm grows closer, the battle reaches such cosmic proportions that temple maiden Keiko and the sorcerer become the respective personifications of the Goddess of Mercy and the Spirit of the Dead. The Tatsumiya family skeletons are also brought to light in the ensuing struggle.

The series ends on a slambang note, though American genre fans expecting the customary grue-lashed duel may be mystified by its ending on a Buddhist note of cosmic reconciliation.

LUPIN III: TALES OF THE WOLF VOL 1: "ALBATROSS: WINGS OF DEATH" ★★

Director: Hayao Miyazaki. A Tokyo Movie Shinsha Production, 1977/1993, approx. 30 mins.

ALBATROSS is the first of two 1977 second season LUPIN segs directed by Miyazaki (under the alias of "Tsumoto Teruki") now available from Streamline. The plot has the gentleman cat burglar and his cohorts attempting to foil the plans of maniacal industrialist Professor Lonebach, who, in addition to kidnapping Lupin's sexy girlfriend Fujiko, intends

to blackmail the world with his atomic bomb-outfitted 1929 airship, *The Albatross*.

Assisted by marksman Jigen, and harried (and helped) by unflagging nemesis and interpol cop Zenigata, Lupin takes to the air to defeat the mad bomber. Based on the characters created by Monkey Punch, ALBATROSS is exciting, fun, and filled with copious bits of inventive action. Miyazaki, who has crafted any number of heart-in-the-mouth Sopwith Camel histrionics, makes the final battle between Lupin and Lonebach genuinely suspenseful and amusing (Lupin and Jigen are forced to battle it out...in their undies), while some tame nudity via Fujiko spices up the proceedings. Though animation is dated by today's standards, the situations are well-crafted, and Streamline's dubbing and sound assists are fine. The LUPIN series has seen three incarnations (in 1971, 1977, and 1984) and five feature films. Miyazaki joined the short-lived 1971 TV series in mid-first season, directing the final ten of 23 episodes.

VOL 2: "ALOHA, LUPIN" ★★

Directed by Hayao Miyazaki. A Tokyo Movie Shinsha Production, 1977/1994, approx. 30 mins.

This, Streamline's release of the Miyazaki-directed caper of the second LUPIN III TV series (1977-1980), is full-throttle fun. Lupin and his gang are (for once) wrongly implicated in a series of robberies master-minded by look-alike impostors who commit the acts with the aid of a flying robot and its girl pilot, Maki. Maki's father, the robot's inventor, died under mysterious circumstances, and the girl believes the gang is aiding her mission to discredit the military's design on the mechanoid. When it turns out that the fake Lupin and company are indeed working for the nasty conglomerate that stole dad's work, only the true Lupin and his perennial policeman nemesis Zenigata can save her from the impostor's evil schemes. Anime fans will of course be quick to note that the episode's "Lambda Robot" is the precursor and dead-ringer for the one in Miyazaki's later '86 work, LAPUTA, but this will hardly diminish the thrills of ALOHA, which features Miyazaki's topical issues of condemnation of those who abuse power along with Nippon fears of rampant militarism. Lupin fans may also get a jolt out of seeing a "what if?" scenario, with the Lupin gang stripped (until truly taking the scene in the last third) of their rough chivalry and presented as a gang of cold-blooded, remorseless felons.

“All cartoons are dubbed,” laughs Carl Macek. “Cartoons don’t talk. Dubbing is not a sign of disrespect. I really can’t see the reason for subtitling.”

Good technical credits, with fine Streamline job on the dubbing and stereo sound.

NADIA (SECRET OF BLUE WATER) EPISODES 1-8 ★★★

Directed by Hideaki Anno. An NHK, Sogovision Production, 1989/1992, approx. 25 mins.

Great stuff! Originally aired on NHK TV in Japan in 1990 as a 39-episode animated series, NADIA (Japanese title translates to “Nadia of the Mysterious Seas”) is a cross-genre-cultural delight for action-adventure buffs of all ages. With references from period Jules Verne’s fantasia (the series was originally going to be an adaptation of 20,000 LEAGUES UNDER THE SEA and Nemo and the Nautilus crew figure prominently), Anderson’s AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY DAYS, serials, Miyazaki’s LAPUTA and Nippon space and mecha operas, NADIA is boundlessly frenetic and imaginative fun, with enough hair-breadth escapes to make RAIDERS look tame. The plot, circa 1889, is a world-wide chase for the possession of a magic jewel (the eponymous “Blue Water”), currently in the keeping of exotic young beauty, Nadia. Aided by a youthful French science prodigy and a gang of warm-hearted thieves, the orphaned girl (actually alien princess and daughter of Captain Nemo!) quests for her origins while fending off evil designs of fascistic tech-oriented Neo-Atlantaens, who intend to use the jewel for a scheme of global domination. The first episodes set up a meeting between Nadia, boy inventor Jean, and Nautilus’ crew as they’re pursued by the rapacious Grandis Gravna Gang and Neo-Atlantaens headed by the megalomaniacal Gargoyle. Dubbing is generally okay, though the voice for Jean is way too old for the character. Sound is not as clear as past

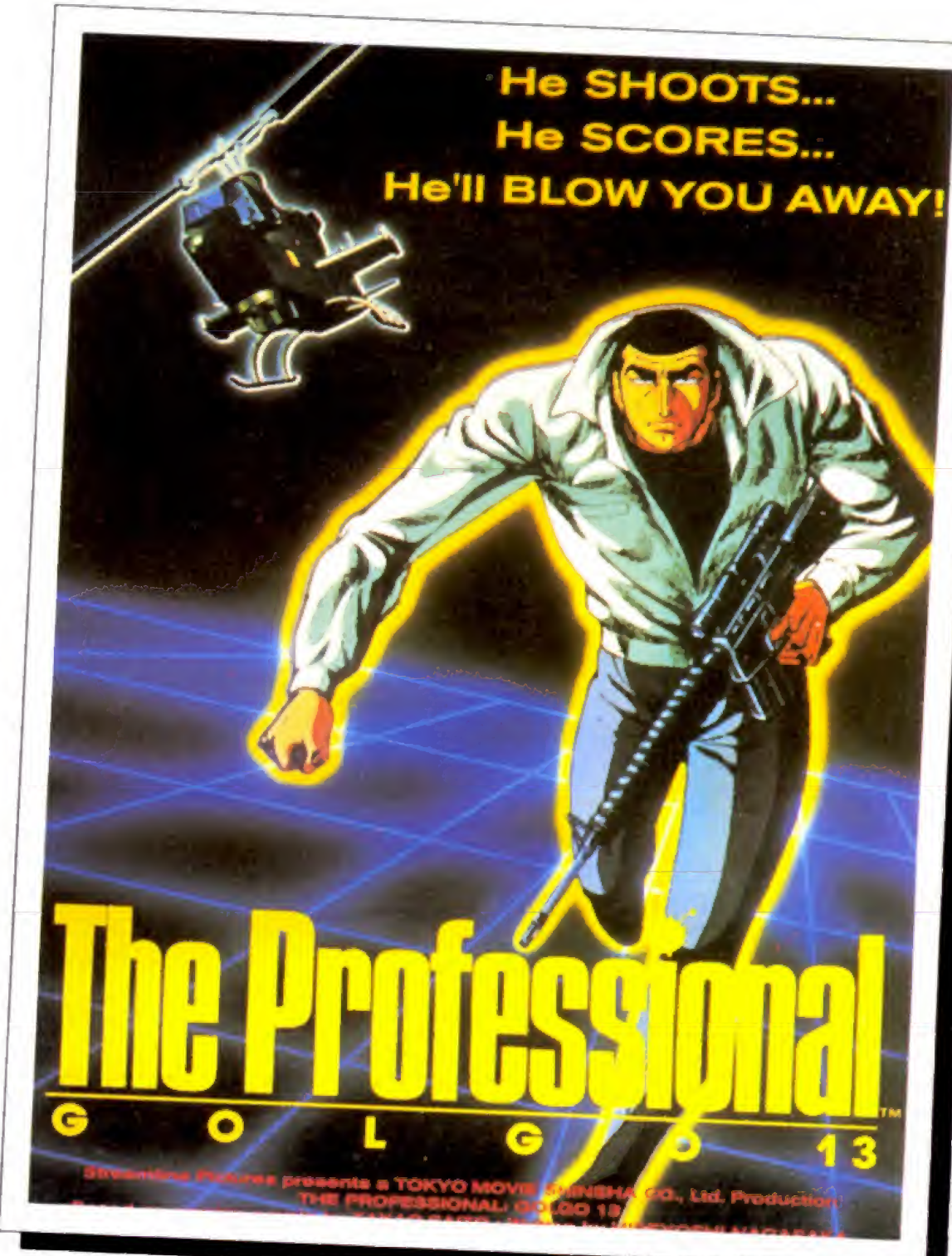
Streamline jobs, but all this is submerged in the sheer energy of storytelling. Streamline currently carries the first eight half-hour OVAs and hopes to pitch the rest to cable. The series was later adapted into two anime films, the second virtually execrated by the original creators. Anime director Anno worked on both GUNBUSTER and WINGS OF HOINNEAMISE. Filled with rich character development, surprisingly mature content, and blessed with a gorgeous and resourceful young heroine, NADIA is the kind of “Sense of Wonder” roller-coaster ride which makes you recall every movie that enthralled you as a kid. Only sourpusses would pass on it. NADIA is also a singular achievement for xenophobic Japan, in being the first anime series to feature a non-white lead heroine.

ROBOTECH: THE SERIES ★★

Directors: various. A Harmony Gold USA Inc./Tatsunoko Ltd. Production, 1982/1985/1992, approx. 120 mins.

Truly a job for Video Watchdog. ROBOTECH was cobbled together from three Japanese series: MACROSS, SOUTHERN CROSS, and MOSPEADA. The Streamline “Perfect Collection” will present the dubbed American episodes coupled with the corresponding episodes of the subtitled Japanese shows in a 41-volume set, so anime buffs will get a kick out of comparing Cpt. Henry Gloval and crew in American and Nippon personae as they defend Earth against alien legions. This definitive introduction to an enduring cross-cultural genre phenomenon (four tapes per series are currently available) is a must for ROBOTECH fanatics, in spite of juvenile scripting and primitive animation technique that makes the show look somewhat dated. □

AFFAIR ON NOLANDIA’s Kel and Yuri will return in future DIRTY PAIR featurettes, including PROJECT EDEN and CONSPIRACY OF FLIGHT 005.



line of hobby kits and figurines, which debuted in 1993 with deluxe kits based on SPEED RACER, ROBOT CARNIVAL, AKIRA and a series of figurines from ROBOT CARNIVAL.

Now, the cult popularity of Japanimation has reached the extent that video chains and music stores like Video Giant, Tower Records, and Music Market have entire sections on anime; alternative rocker Matthew Sweet has done music videos featuring clips from URUSEI YATSURA and COBRA, and even mega-critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert have given thumbs up to films like AKIRA and Miyazaki’s MY NEIGHBOR TOTORO. Yet Macek fears that the market is in danger of burning itself out due to the general blitz of distributors vying for recognition of their product. With the glut of material, the unwary anime convert will find it difficult to distinguish between the superior product and the dross.

“I think the education level of the American public is very slow,” says Macek. “Right

Osami Dezaki’s THE PROFESSIONAL enthusiastically overturns the cliches of the violent hitman-for-hire genre.

now, there is an overkill situation because of over-saturation. The consumer doesn’t realize what’s truly good. It’s like the glut of comic books; the buyer suddenly pulls back and buys only Marvel, DC, and Dark Horse. There’s too much material out there, and it’s a very unstable situation.”

Of Japanimation’s penchant for pushing the limits of the art form, Macek concludes, “Animation is the perfect medium for cinematic expressions. There are no physical limitations—you can have a cast of thousands, exotic locales, and dozens of exploding cars and buildings, without going over budget on location scouting, massive casting calls, and expensive special effects. Animation can be funny, adventurous, or romantic. It’s just a matter of being a good storyteller. The epitome of animation is that it’s both realistic and surreal at the same time.” □



PREY

Karen

*By Al Ryan &
Dan Cziraky*

"These days, you have monsters over seven feet tall, paint all over them with boils and bubbles, and they look a little bit like pterodactyls, and that's pretty awful to look at! Now, you know you can't overcome these pterodactyl-monsters, but you certainly can overcome a little doll...or so you think!"

So speaks actress Karen Black, who is something of an expert on skirmishing with tiny terrors. Though only twelve inches high, the Zuni warrior fetish doll that haunts her in the classic "Prey" segment of Dan Curtis' *TRILOGY OF TERROR* (1975) proved to be an inexorable antagonist. "I think it had to do with little things," whispers Black. "You know, the last thing in the world you think is going to get you—do you in—is something small. It's a moment-by-moment kind of suspense. Why can't this small thing be defeated? The continued inability to

Karen Black's genre film credits run the gamut from big-budget science-fiction like *INVADERS FROM MARS* (left and lower left) to low-budget horror like *CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT* (below, with director Tony Randel).



OF THE DEVIL DOLL

Black on skirmishing with tiny terrors.

overcome this little doll touches on something true...and deep."

That episode of *TRILOGY*, scripted by the brilliant Richard Matheson (*I am Legend*), completely eclipsed the other two parts of the made-for-TV movie. The final scene—after destroying the doll, Black's character crouches on the floor, knife in hand, waiting for her mother to arrive, while a predatory grin reveals that she is now possessed by the Zuni warrior's spirit—is still one of the most disturbing fictional images ever broadcast in prime time. "It's a classic," the actress agrees.

Born Karen Blanche Ziegler in the Chicago suburb of Park Ridge (in either 1942, 1945, or 1948, depending on the source), the actress exhibits some of the same quirky characteristics with which she imbues her film roles. (While being interviewed, she prepares for her daughter's birthday party, "biting the little feet off candy people—and they taste like feet!") She married Charles Black at an early age, but soon divorced. After finishing high school, she accepted a small part in *THE PRIME TIME* (1959), an early, non-gore (believe it or not) film from schlockmeisters David F. Friedman and Herschell Gordon Lewis (*BLOOD FEAST*). It's a film on which Black refuses to comment, other than stating, "It's too long ago, and I really don't want that put in there! Unless you want me to look really, really old, and if that's what this interview's about, then let's end it now. God, I mean, I was still at home when I made that, and I've had it with that movie!"

In the early 1960s, at the age of 17, Black abandoned her life in Illinois and moved to

THE BIGGER THEY ARE

"These days, you have monsters seven feet tall that look like pterodactyls, and you know you can't overcome them, but you can certainly overcome a little doll...or so you think!"



New York City, where she briefly studied acting under legendary instructor Lee Strasberg. "I only went to a couple of classes," she recalls. "Everyone was so self-conscious, but what makes a character so enthralling is that they have no self-consciousness. People don't have any idea what they're like. They have no idea how they seem to others—not a shred; they just behave."

When not working odd jobs or studying her craft, Black went out on a long series of auditions that eventually paid off. "I did Shakespeare in the Park for Joseph Papp for a couple of years; he thought I was brilliant. I did some off-Broadway, and then I finally got a play called *The Playroom*. I was nominated for the Best Actress award by the New York Drama Critics' Circle."

After being cast, along with *Playroom* co-star Peter Kastner, in Francis Ford Coppola's *YOU'RE A BIG BOY NOW* (1966), Black appeared as a regular in the fantasy-comedy TV series, *THE INVADERS*, before going on to co-star in 1969's anti-establishment road-trip movie, *EASY RIDER*. Jack Nicholson was nominated for the Best Supporting Actor Oscar, but Black was unforgettable as a hooker, tripping and flipping on LSD in a cemetery with Dennis Hopper and Peter Fonda. It was the first of many roles to capitalize on her gift to perform bizarre, almost freakish scenes, yet maintain a sort of cockeyed innocence.

She had another bit part in 1969's *HARD CONTRACT*, starring James Coburn as a soulless hit man obsessed with prostitutes. But her film career really took flight when Jack



Black and her son Hunter Carson co-starred with RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD's James Karen (left) in Tobe Hooper's remake of INVADERS FROM MARS (1986).

Nicholson directed her in FIVE EASY PIECES (1970), a character drama that earned her a much-deserved Best Supporting Actress Oscar nomination. Black calls Nicholson "a very loving friend...very supportive. He's a perfect director."

Roles in A GUNFIGHT, BORN TO WIN, and Nicholson's DRIVE, HE SAID, brought her more attention in 1971. CISCO PIKE (1972), a drug drama directed by B.W.L. Norton, featured Black as the girlfriend of rock star and marijuana dealer Kris Kristofferson. She received rave reviews in PORTNOY'S COMPLAINT (1972), a miserable box office failure which was trashed by critics as well. Other films during this period include the Canadian thriller THE PYX (1973), the big studio remake of THE GREAT GATSBY (1974), and the black comedy LAW AND DISORDER (1974).

Cast opposite Charlton Heston (PLANET OF THE APES), Black topped an all-star cast in director Jack Smight's critically loathed but commercially successful disaster-movie sequel, AIRPORT 1975. "Part of the reason this movie made a lot of money is because of my work, and what helped that was when I went to the rushes. I never watch rushes, but Jack invited me," says Black. When she saw the over-the-top performances of such co-stars as Efrem Zimbalist Jr., Helen Reddy (as a singing nun!), Sid Caesar, Linda Blair, and George Kennedy, she de-

cidied on how to approach her part as the stewardess who must fly a disabled 747 airliner after a mid-air collision kills most of the flight crew. "The other people in the film were all kind of doing it like a comedy. So, if nobody really cared about this plane, then why would the audience care? I decided that I'd better give a damn, a really big damn. So, I did—my legs would literally shake, out of control, and I was upset because the plane was this, or the plane was that, you know? I really concentrated and worked hard, and I think it helped to make that movie work."

Black had a bumper crop in 1975, with three major projects showcasing her talents. For Robert Altman's NASHVILLE, the director's most successful film to date, she wrote and sang her own songs as country-western star Connie White. DAY OF THE LOCUST, based on Nathanael West's 1939 novel about the experiences of a young screenwriter (William Atherton) in the early days of Tinseltown, starred Black and Donald Sutherland (M*A*S*H).

Then came TRILOGY OF TERROR, for ABC-TV. Director Dan Curtis was no stranger to horror projects, having created the Gothic '60s soap opera DARK SHADOWS (and the recent NBC-TV prime-time revival), and directed and/or produced such telefilms as THE NIGHT STALKER (1972) and its sequel, THE NIGHT STRANGLER (1973), and DRACULA (1973), the latter

CANNON FODDER

"I had a hard time with Cannon. As a result, I'm not good in INVADERS FROM MARS. It wasn't the director's fault. There were elements in the company that were suppressive."

with future Oscar-winner Jack Palance (CITY SLICKERS). The shocks of TRILOGY'S "Prey" episode were "much more frightening," according to Black, in the uncut theatrical version released overseas. "It was considered too frightening for American TV.

"Dan Curtis is an emotional sort of director," Black continues. "I loved that. He knows how to make a scene work, and he's very flowing. He's very free, outgoing—and very handsome, sexy guy, by the way." Curtis cast Black as the female lead in his 1976 feature film, BURNT OFFERINGS. The cast included such horror veterans as Oliver Reed (CURSE OF THE WEREWOLF), Lee Montgomery (BEN), Bette Davis (WHATEVER HAPPENED TO BABY JANE?), and Burgess Meredith (BEWARE THE BLOB!). "I was pregnant with Hunter at the time," she says, referring to the son who would later co-star with her in INVADERS FROM MARS. "It was just a very good time." The tale of supernatural horror and possession required numerous make-up changes for Black. "I aged in the movie, and sometimes

we couldn't continue a scene because we would have to keep running upstairs to change my hair: sometimes it was long; then it was gray. We were in Northern California, and the weather was always changing, too."

For his final film before his death, Alfred Hitchcock's cast Black and William Devane (THE MISSILES OF OCTOBER) as villainous jewel thieves and kidnappers in FAMILY PLOT (1976). Black fondly remembers Hitchcock: "I kind of loved him; I really did. He was fatherly, and very, very congenial and comfortable. He liked jokes. He had a blue party once, where everything was blue. He once had a dinner party, and at this great big round table, he had names on the plates, but the names were of nobody who was there! Then, he just sat there and watched everyone walk around and around the table, looking for their own names! He was very playful, very sweet."

Over the years, Black's films have ranged in quality and budget, everything from CAPRICORN ONE (1978) to KILLER FISH (1979). She did

Black's many non-genre credits include DAY OF THE LOCUST, with Burgess Meredith, who went on to co-star with her in Dan Curtis' BURNT OFFERINGS.



more television work, such as 1977's *THE STRANGE POSSESSION OF MRS. OLIVER* and the mini-series *POWER* (1980). The former, written by Richard Matheson and directed by Gordon Hessler (*GOLDEN VOYAGE OF SINBAD*), extends the schizophrenic vamp-innocent performance she gave in the second *TRILOGY* episode into a feature length tour-de-force. In 1982, she returned to Broadway in the cast of *COME BACK TO THE FIVE AND DIME*, *JIMMY DEAN*, *JIMMY DEAN*, directed by Robert Altman. Black played a transsexual, and reprised the role in Altman's film version, which co-starred Cher. The same year, Black also starred in Henry Jaglom's art house favorite, *CAN SHE BAKE A CHERRY PIE?*

After several low-budget projects like *SAVAGE DAWN* (1985), a *MAD MAX* rip-off, Black and son Hunter Carson were cast in the 1986 remake of *INVADERS FROM MARS*, the 1953 sci-fi camp classic. In the wake of *POLTERGEIST*, Tobe Hooper (*THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE*) had a three-picture contract with Cannon Films, which spawned the *INVADERS* remake, *LIFE-FORCE*, and *THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE PART 2*. Friction between Cannon and Hooper marred all three productions, and Black had her own problems with *INVADERS*. "I had a hard time with Cannon, I'll say that," she comments. "As a result, I'm not good in the movie, and I looked terrible—I'm yellow during some of it. It's not the director's fault, he's a very fine person, and I like him a lot. There were elements in the company that were suppressive, frankly, and I was just under an incredible amount of strain...but Hunter wasn't. He had a different way of working than I had, and he was just wonderful."

Black's career continued to include more genre and exploitation films, including *ETERNAL EVIL* (1986); Larry Cohen's *IT'S ALIVE III: ISLAND OF THE ALIVE* (1987); *OUT OF THE DARK* (1989); the erotically charged *NIGHT ANGEL* (1991); and *CHIL-*



The role for which Black will always be fondly remembered by genre fans: confronting the malicious Zuni warrior fetish in the "Prey" episode of *TRILOGY OF TERROR*, directed by Dan Curtis and scripted by Richard Matheson from his story.

DREN OF THE NIGHT (1992). Asked about producer-director Fred Olen Ray's reworking of Poe's "The Premature Burial" into 1991's *THE HAUNTING FEAR*, Black claims, "I don't even remember it." ("She was an extremely peculiar person," comments Ray. "Not difficult, but very, very unusual. Not what I'm used to.") Black's memories of Gary Graver's *EVIL SPIRITS* (1991) are a lit-

tle clearer: "What I accomplished with [that film] was that I got the audience to like a leading character who killed people. I like to do that: to lead an audience."

Besides raising Hunter and her two other children, Black occupies herself with a musical career, singing at Tinseltown night spots such as the historic Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel. "I do love music," she says, "and

I'm real good when I get up in front of an audience." She also has her sights set on producing films. "That's more important to me than my acting," she asserts. *BREAKING UP WITH PAUL*, which she scripted, stars Martin Mull, Lainie Kazan, and Lee Purcell. "I'm looking forward to doing much bigger films," she says, "because of the people we're attracting." □

THE STRANGE OBJECTS OF DAVID CRONENBERG'S DESIRE

An Exhibition of Drawings, Objects, and Creatures from the Toronto auteur's films.

By Shlomo Schwartzberg

A Mugwump sits brooding outside the door to the museum exhibit. Inside, videos are running clips from some very weird horror movies. Drawings of monsters adorn the walls; and props, such as the "gynecological instruments for mutant women," are on display.

The collection is appropriately titled "The Strange Objects of David Cronenberg's Desire: An Exhibition of Drawings, Objects and Creatures from the Films of David Cronenberg." These 250 props, drawings, and scenes from the films of the Toronto horror filmmaker—which have been exhibited in Toronto, Japan, and Greece—offer a window into the world of one of cinema's most original practitioners, a man who has disturbed many with his uncompromising, creepy and unique vision. From his early 1970s' experimental films, *STEREO* and *CRIMES OF THE FUTURE*, through to his big-budget, special effects-laden efforts such as *THE FLY* and *NAKED LUNCH*, Cronenberg has attracted much popular and critical interest, more than reason enough for setting



Above: the maquette for the mechanically operated creature in *THE FLY*. Inset: Drawing of a Mugwump from *NAKED LUNCH*.

up an exhibit based on his work.

Interestingly enough, it was in Japan, not in his Toronto hometown, that the exhibition first set up shop, in the Tokyo Seibu department store no less.

"The Japanese love Cro-

nenberg," says Fern Bayer, Chief Curator of the Government of Ontario Art Collection, who co-ordinated the show. "Cronenberg has a major following in Japan, both of cult devotees and the intelligentsia."

While Cronenberg made himself available to Bayer in

the three years she spent arranging the exhibit, the process of getting it off the ground was not easy. "Hardly any director keeps props, as I found out," says Bayer. Some of those props, such as the mock-up of the teleporter pod used by scientist Seth Brundle in *THE FLY* (1986), had to be brought over from California. Others, such as the "live" typewriters and foam rubber Mugwumps from *NAKED LUNCH* (1991), were rescued just before they were about to be thrown in the trash by Chris Walas, Inc., the California effects shop which made them. From Cronenberg's early films, unfortunately little remains, other than a few sketches and a scale model of one of the "parasites" from his first feature, *SHIVERS* (1975).

The cumulative effect of the Cronenberg exhibit, which played in Toronto simultaneously with the release of his last, most mainstream, and most criticized film, *M. BUTTERFLY* (1993), is more than a little disquieting. Be it the display of the startlingly "real" tools used on the hospital patient in *DEAD RINGERS* (1988) or the arresting Mugwumps engaged in sexual congress from *NAKED LUNCH*, the objects on display are certainly not your typical museum exhibit, something made apparent from some of the shocked exclamations and mutterings



An arrangement of Mugwumps on display—not what one usually sees in an art museum, but perfectly appropriate for this particular exhibition.

overheard from patrons wandering through the show at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto. (A sign posted at the entrance to the exhibit warns of its "shocking" nature. Cronenberg himself has had censorship problems in Ontario, notably with *THE BROOD*, from which were excised thirty seconds of the penultimate scene revealing the brood's secret—of Samantha Eggar licking their placenta.)

The exhibit, which is set up in chronological order, marries video clips with information

about the special effects and meanings of Cronenberg's films. His recurring themes of disease and decay crop up ("I think of horror films as art; I think of them as films that make you confront aspects of your own life that are difficult to face"), as do his often remarkable visual concepts such as Samantha Eggar suckling the monsters of *THE BROOD* (1979) or James Woods inserting the cassette into his stomach in 1981's prophetically cyberpunk *VIDEODROME* ("The image invades the mind").

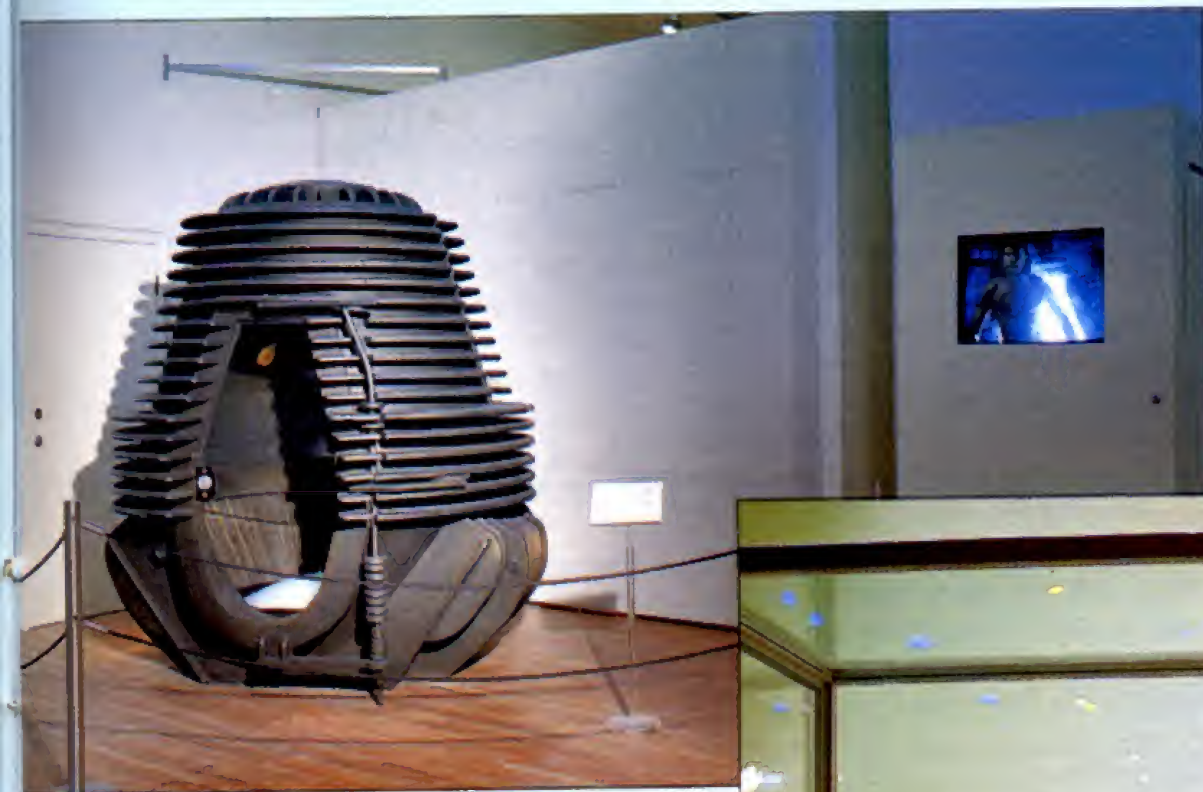
"I think of horror films as art. I think of them as films that make you confront aspects of your own life that are difficult to face.... The image invades the mind."

The *Strange Objects of David Cronenberg's Desire* does suffer from the lack of early Cronenberg props, thus robbing it from showing how he developed his vision over the years; and the videos lack power when shown out of context. But it's evident that Cronenberg has ventured where few filmmakers have gone before. As he says in one of the written quotes excerpted to ac-

company the visuals, "As an artist, one is bound to explore every aspect of human experience, the darkest corners, not necessarily, but if that is where one is lead that's where one must go." As he prepares to direct an adaptation of J.G. Ballard's apocalyptic science fiction novel *Crash*, it's obvious that the dark side of life is one where he continues to reside. □



Clockwise from top center: 1) The insectoid Clark Nova Typewriter, used in *NAKED LUNCH* by Peter Weller. 2) One of the Mugwumps created by Chris Walas Inc. for the same film. 3) A glass display case houses a trio of outre artifacts from Cronenberg's past films, which tend to draw gasps of disgust from museum aficionados accustomed to more traditional fare. 4) The virtual reality helmet worn by James Woods in *VIDEODROME*. 5) A video monitor displays excerpts from the director's work on the wall beside the teleporter pod from the *FLY*. 6) One of the few surviving props from early Cronenberg films, a wire-operated parasite from *SHIVERS* (a.k.a. *THEY CAME FROM WITHIN*). 7) Gynecological instrument for "mutant women," from *DEAD RINGERS*.



The latest look at the dark side of the American Dream

NATURAL BORN KILLERS

A Warner Bros release presented in association with Regency Enterprises and Alcor Films of an Ixtlan/New Regency Production in association with JD Prods. Directed by Oliver Stone. Produced by Jane Harnsher, Don Murphy, Clayton Townsend. Screenplay by David Veloz, Richard Rutowski, Stone, story by Quentin Tarantino. Camera, (Technicolor) Robert Richardson. Editors, Hank Corwin, Brian Berdan. Music, Budd Carr. Sound, (Dolby) David MacMillan. Production Design, Victor Kempster. Visual effects, Pacific Data Images. Animation sequences, Colossal Pictures. Animation designer, Mike Smith. 8/94, 119 mins, R.

Mickey.....Woody Harrelson
Mallory.....Juliette Lewis
Wayne Gale.....Robert Downey Jr.
Dwight McClusky.....Tommy Lee Jones
Jack Stagnetti.....Tom Sizemore
Mallory's dad.....Rodney Dangerfield
Old Indian.....Russell Means
Mallory's mom.....Edie McClurg
Gas Station Attendant.....Balthazar Getty
Duncan Homolka.....Joe Grifasi
Mabel.....O-Lan Jones



Live from death row: Stone's newest film portrays the media as representative of America's sick fascination with serial killers and mass murderers.

by Anthony P. Montesano

Three-quarters of the way through the blood-soaked visual onslaught of director Oliver Stone's NATURAL BORN KILLERS, your friendly neighborhood mass murderers, Mickey and Mallory Knox stumble upon the home of a Native American shaman. The wise man recognizes the killers for who they are. The words: "Demon" and "She Crazy?" literally flash across their chests as the shaman observes them. But even this wise man—the only non-violent character in the entire film—is helpless, and accepts his certain death with a quiet resolve.

In classic myths, a core of Goodness has generally been overshadowed by Evil only to triumph in the end or, at least, offer a glimmer of hope that one day, Good will prevail (King Arthur, Hercules, Candide, etc). It's the eternal search for the Holy Grail, the Garden of Eden and Utopia. However, in offering his entry into the ongoing subgenre of horror films which explore hidden evils, Stone will have no part of the tradition. His is a tale of a quest for the anti-grail. There is no light at the end of the tunnel, no hope on the other side of the rainbow. No Garden, no Utopia, no God. In NATURAL BORN KILLERS, Stone has recast the American landscape as an inescapable hell where even a "wise" and "good" person falls victim to the pervading evil. In doing so, he has taken the level of the subversive horror film—such as PSYCHO, BLUE

VELVET, THE 'BURBS, and PARENTS—to a new depth, one mired in the notion that there is no Good in the world, only varying degrees of Evil.

Even Dante's *Divine Comedy* leads us from the very depths of Hell into the heights of Heaven. Certainly, Dante would argue, Evil exists, but so does Good, stemming from God and trickling down from the heavens to nature and to us. The notion of the complete absence of good is a fairly new one. It's a theory espoused in a secular society in which the principles of the Protestant American ethic have given way to a sort of controlled chaos. Without God at the center to keep things in order, one could argue that the landscape has become like that so bleakly portrayed in NATURAL BORN KILLERS. In a Godless, secular society the notion of Good therefore becomes arbitrary. Each individual has his or her own code of morality. Stone would argue that, although Mickey and Mallory kill, their crimes pale in comparison to the American media, the American family, the American criminal justice system—indeed, the very fabric of America itself.

The most vile aspect of NATURAL BORN KILLERS is its notion that Mickey and Mallory's cross-country slaughter fest is in some way "pure," in an animalistic sense. Thus, Mickey and Mallory should, in the film's view, bear no responsibilities for their actions—because, after all, the big bad

world around them is so much worse.

Stone has encased his tale in an audio-visual nightmare hailed by some as visionary and brilliant. It's his most out-of-control film since his drug-addled and now disowned directorial debut, SEIZURE (1973). Taking techniques employed in JFK, he melds different film stocks, wildly canted camera angles, psychedelic rear projections, and an audacious, mind-numbing soundtrack (featuring the likes of Nine Inch Nails and Rage Against the Machine). Every scene seems shot from five different points of view. As in JFK (where, if you think too hard, you realize everybody was responsible for Kennedy's death: Mafia, Russians, Cubans, CIA, FBI, L.B.J., you, me, the milkman), NBK offers the same dilemma: How can you judge Evil if there is no Good to be found?

The notion that Evil lurks behind the facade of Good is not new; it has in fact been explored in the American horror film with varying degrees of success. In many ways, Alfred Hitchcock's PSYCHO (1960) is the first modern horror movie. Although he had explored the theme of evil in the embodiment of a "good" person in previous films (e.g., SUSPICION and SHADOW OF A DOUBT), he turned Hollywood morality on its ear when he dared to kill off the film's apparent "star" (Janet Leigh) a quarter of the way through. It's no accident that Leigh's character,

Marion Crane, is herself a thief. Banks are the sanctuaries of capitalism. And the people who work in them are implicitly trusted by the clientele. However, when God is absent from the picture, his replacement is money. Chaucer's pronouncement of money being the root of evil brings about sure death to the characters in "The Pardoner's Tale." Likewise in PSYCHO, it is greed that unlocks the evils stirring beneath the surface of this country. The surprise is that the film is about not Marion but rather the nameless evil that befalls her. Norman Bates surely exists separate and apart from Marion, but it is her theft that sets about the series of events that unleashes the dormant evil waiting in the person of Norman. The embezzlement plot of PSYCHO, in retrospect, offers an explanation for Marion's brutal death (i.e. Evil begets Evil). But unlike its companion THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE (both were based on the true story of Ed Gein), PSYCHO fits neatly into the subgenre of horror films discussed in this article. While Leatherface is outwardly frightening, Norman Bates is not.

PSYCHO is a landmark in the horror genre for putting the all-American face of Norman Bates on the soul of a grave-robbing, cannibalistic, cross-dressing serial killer. In many ways it is the grandparent of the spate of films that were to follow two decades later: BLUE VELVET, THE 'BURBS, PARENTS, TWIN PEAKS: FIRE

Stone projects character descriptions, seen from an Indian shaman's p.o.v.



WALK WITH ME. But all those films fall into the post-Watergate America—after a society had turned away from God, and its government. When a country can't trust its own President, a pattern of distrust will logically follow: Can you trust your neighbors? Your parents?

Horror films of the post-Watergate era are rife with rampant distrust. Still, there exists a nature of Good that has a chance to prevail. No such nature exists in **NBK**. Stone bombards us with random images of violence: a man beating another man in the background, a headless body rising from the easy chair, a dysfunctional family recast as a sitcom with Rodney Dangerfield as the incestuous brute of a father, Halloween versions of the devil, and so on. Stone has defended the film by arguing that it is in fact a satire, but such a clear disdain for the media and law enforcement comes through that one wonders whether Stone was merely playing with his audience or whether he truly believes that all hope is lost.

David Lynch has offered two classics in the horror subgenre of the American Gothic. Both the landmark **BLUE VELVET** and its obvious cousin **TWIN PEAKS: FIRE WALK WITH ME** pull apart the notions of Good and Evil. **BLUE VELVET** is a masterpiece of the genre. As it opens, red flowers are seen against a white picket fence and a blue sky. But Lynch's red, white, and blue Americana is not to be trusted. As the sequence continues, a shiny red fire engine eases down the street, but even as the fireman politely waves to children on the sidewalk, outside a

Mickey is tagged as "demon" (below). "She crazy" is Mallory's epithet (left).



David Lynch's **BLUE VELVET** can be seen as the progenitor of the recent spate of films taking a horrifying look at the bleak underbelly of the American Dream.

nearby white house, a man watering his lawn clenches his neck and falls to the ground. The camera then travels underground where the amplified sound of beetles rising to the surface takes over. Within a minute of screen time, Lynch lets the audience know that things are not what they seem.

Upon returning to Lumberton because of his father's sudden health condition, Jeffrey Beaumont (Kyle MacLachlan) discovers a severed ear in the woods. He later teams with the local detective's daughter Sandy (played with pure innocence by Laura Dern), and together they begin to unravel the mystery. The vicarious thrill Jeffrey receives from spying on—and the subsequent affair he has with—singer Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini) unlocks the evil of Dennis Hopper's Frank Booth. Lynch uses the mechanics of a mystery plot to delve into a nightmarish underbelly of the town and to present a prescient tale of light and dark, of voyeurism and violence, of true love and sexual obsession. "I'm seeing something that was always hidden," Jeffrey tells Sandy. "I don't know if you're a detective or a pervert," she says. "That's for me to know and you to find out," he responds. Jeffrey's curiosity takes him deeper into the dark world of Frank Booth, and the lines between the two characters eventually blur. When Frank smears lipstick on himself and seals a pact with Jeffrey, declaring "You're just like me," Lynch implies that Jeffrey and we—the audience—are caught by an inner darkness from which there is no escape.

Likewise, Laura Palmer, of **TWIN PEAKS**, is thought to be the

perfect American sweetheart. But, when she's found murdered and wrapped in plastic, only a select few know of her exploits with drugs and prostitution, her dark nights of passage into the nightmare world which also sucked in Jeffrey of **VELVET**. The themes of the two films are quite similar. Palmer, half way through, laments her situation and knows her fate is sealed because even "the angels have left her." In **PEAKS**, Evil is in familiar faces and close to home. Laura knows—too late—that the power of "BOB" resides in her father. Even the best of towns and "best" people, Lynch argues, harbor evil secrets waiting to surface, like the bugs in **BLUE VELVET**.

Both **PARENTS** and **THE 'BURBS** explore this notion. Like **PEAKS** and **VELVET**, these films upset the quiet life of the American suburb and undermine the no-

tion of the post-World War II American Dream. The Eisenhower-era fastidiousness of the couple in **PARENTS** has their son wondering whether there's something to worry about. He discovers his parents are mass murderers and cannibals. In **THE 'BURBS**, the Spielbergian suburbia is given the Joe Dante treatment, which has Tom Hanks' character wondering what's up with his weird neighbors. But in trying to find out, Hanks and his equally nosy friends commit an act they would not want reciprocated: trespassing.

How these films differ from '50s paranoia films is that those tagged their source of Evil on a clear enemy: communism. The post-Watergate horror films discussed here are more vague about the source of Evil. It doesn't come from "out there"; it comes from inside.

Films like **THE 'BURBS** and **PARENTS** pose the logical question which befalls a society in complete distrust. **PEAKS** and **VELVET** question whether we can even trust ourselves. **NBK** trusts no one and suggests that the sure road is doom, a post-apocalyptic vision brought upon ourselves not by the Bomb or the Communists but by our own insatiable desire to root out that which is immoral among ourselves, fed by the corruption and the ever-present eye of the media. In **NBK**, the Evil—unleashed in films like **TWIN PEAKS** and **BLUE VELVET**—has reached critical mass and consumed an entire country. There is no more Good, only varying degrees of Evil.

Where one may ask, can the subgenre go from here? □

Part of Stone's stylistic overkill in **KILLERS**: surrealistic back-projected images.



CINEMA

By Steve Biodrowski

ASIAN INVASION

Dim domestic offerings, but great imports.

The idea of devoting a column to recent Hong Kong releases has often occurred to me, but space prevented it until now. Unfortunately, it is also time for our annual assessment of the previous year's best films. However, since most of the Hong Kong titles I've wanted to mention have made it onto the "Best" list, there's enough overlap that this column really does replace the Hong Kong column I never did.

There were good American films last year, but these were few and far between. Often the most memorable productions were interesting more for their ambition than their achievement (MARY SHELLY'S FRANKENSTEIN, INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE). In any case, summing up last year is somewhat tricky, so I've cheated a bit on what was supposed to be a "Top Ten" list, in order to give proper recognition to good filmmaking wherever it emerged, even if only briefly.

THE BEST

1. WICKED CITY kicks ass like no other film of '94. Not so ambitious in terms of color palette and animation as AKIRA, nor quite as graphic as UROTSUKI-DOJI, the film is nevertheless in many ways superior to both, thanks to a solid hard-boiled plot that grounds the fantastic elements in a foundation of verisimilitude. Though the usual misogynistic violence is present, it is subsumed into the story by being focused on a character (Black Guard agent Makia) whose self-sacrifice raises her to heroic levels. Also fascinating is the way that



The best film of 1994 is actually six years old. Although Japan's WICKED CITY was produced in 1989, the anime masterpiece made its domestic debut last year.

Makia merges the cinema's usual Madonna/Whore dichotomy into one character: she starts off as a *femme fatale*, then emerges as the mother of the savior of the world, and—here's the kicker—she does this without losing any of the qualities which distinguished her in the first place. She's just as lethal as ever; in fact, her first act after being "transmogrified" (as the film calls it) is to off one of the villains. Cool.

2. THE BRIDE WITH WHITE HAIR is the best fantasy to emerge from Hong Kong since Tsui Hark launched the current wave. A great example of storytelling over story, in the sense that there is precious little plot, the film visually elaborates every nuance for maximum

emotional impact. Basically a tragic story of two star-crossed lovers, this is one of the most beautiful fantasies ever filmed. The supernatural elements emerge mostly in the powers the characters employ during combat, but the whole movie is suffused with a legendary quality that places it squarely in the realm of the unreal. Brigitte Lin is wonderful as the title character, who walks the gauntlet for the sake of love, then goes mad with grief and loses her hair color when her lover betrays her trust. Director Ronnie Yu is a talent to watch.

3. Producer-director Tsui Hark, meanwhile, showed that he can do more than rest on past glories. GREEN SNAKE is his best effort since A CHINESE GHOST STORY. Joey Wong is back, again playing a supernatural being who falls in love with a mortal man. The usual Hark sense of humor is present, along with colorful effects, but the action has been reserved for a few climactic moments. Instead, the focus is on the tragic turns of the story, which leave most of the characters either dead or guilt-ridden by the conclusion. Amazingly, this cruel outcome is far more satisfying than the conventional happy ending would have been, proving that melodrama can be moving rather than corny, when the bigger-than-life emotions are earned honestly. Wong and Maggie Cheung (as

snake spirits struggling to attain humanity) are gorgeous, amusing, and erotic, often simultaneously, as when they practice getting that undulating slither out of their walk now that they're using two legs.

4. WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE is not as grimly horrific as the original, but it is uncompromised by executive tinkering with the ending, which means that Freddy is dispatched without the usual "he'll be back" tag. One of the best sequels ever made, this film reimagines the NIGHTMARE mythology in faery tale terms. Not only that, it makes a very moving argument (obviously inspired by the late psychoanalyst Bruno Betelheim) for the "meaning and importance" that these tales and, by extension, horror films have for us. Also impressive is that this film manages to hold a straight face while keeping its tongue always planted firmly in cheek, the first time anyone has managed that trick to my knowledge. We're clearly supposed to accept, from the way the story is presented, that we are seeing real events, which formed the basis of a script, which then became the movie we're watching—except that, in the film, Wes Craven is dreaming the events and writing them before they happen, so maybe he really did create rather than merely record. Never has the power of the imagination been exploited so wonderfully as a dramatic conceit.

There were some good U.S. films. WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE extended beyond the original.

BRIDE WITH WHITE HAIR, the best Hong Kong fantasy this side of Tsui Hark.



5. I'm squeezing two films into this category, because the second two entries in the *SWORDSMAN* trilogy really do continue one storyline. *SWORDSMAN II* is about evading responsibility; in *SWORDSMAN III*, the title character finally acknowledges "I bear full responsibility." What elevates this action-packed saga to a higher level is Brigitte Lin's portrayal of Asia the Invincible. Once a mortal man, now an androgynous superbeing, the character almost qualifies as an old-fashioned movie monster, but director Ching Siu-Tung and Lin always emphasize the emotions, the one thing tying Asia to his/her former humanity. What emerges is a fascinating portrait of what happens when mortal transforms into immortal, and it's done a damn sight better than Neil Jordan managed in *INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE*. One can only hope that, if *Queen of the Damned* is eventually adapted to the screen, David Geffen turns the project over to Hark and Tung.

6. Writer-director Sam Sheperd's *SILENT TONGUE* is a self-consciously arty film that takes its themes very seriously, but it triumphs by earning its pretensions. Look for it in the Westerns section of your video store, but there is a strong fantasy element as the ghost of an Indian woman, sold into marriage, returns to taunt the mad husband (River Phoenix) who will not let her rest in peace. The slow pace pays off wonderfully by following the character threads through to their conclusions, thus examining and amplifying the humanity of those characters; even if some of them remain unsympathetic, we understand them in a way that makes them more than walking mouthpieces or potential victims. Also amusing is the way the white characters are all Irishmen whose native superstitions ("The banshees will get you") nicely balance the Indian mysticism. Quite a ghoulish movie in its own way, but too dramatically effective to be merely morbid.

7. *WOLF*, unlike *SILENT TONGUE*, doesn't quite work its ideas out to dramatic satisfaction in the third act, choosing instead to toss in some mechanical horror situations (i.e., a bad werewolf to oppose Jack Nicholson's "good" werewolf). On the other hand, even as the ideas fall apart, the film remains enjoyable. Director Mike Nichols and company may not have known quite what they wanted to do with



Another fine effort from Hollywood, *THE CROW* bested *BATMAN* in the dark, brooding hero department, with a fine performance from the late Brandon Lee.

the conclusion, but they went ahead and did it with conviction anyway. The script features some great dialogue, which is well served by excellent actors, and even the obligatory horror scenes are much better handled here by Nichols than they were by Kenneth Branagh in *FRANKENSTEIN*.

8. In *ZERAM*, a live-action science-fiction effort from Japan, an escaped prisoner (the titular cyborg or whatever the hell it is) heads to Earth, but two alien bounty hunters (one of whom is a computer voice) set up a virtual reality duplication of his landing point as a trap. Unfortunately, two goofs from the Tokyo electric company wander into the trap as well, and mayhem (as they say) ensues. The beauty of the premise is that humor can effortlessly be derived by telling the story from the point of view of two characters who really don't know what's going on, while—

at the same time—the credibility of the situation is never jeopardized past the point where it can generate genuine thrills. (This may sound a lot like R2-D2 and C3PO, but then George Lucas lifted the concept from Kurosawa's *THE HIDDEN FORTRESS*.) Yuko Moriyama, as the humanoid bounty hunter, is everything we could want from a female lead: attractive enough to be a movie star, talented enough to carry the movie, and capable enough of handling herself in the combat scenes with a Terminator-like opponent. The shot wherein a flick of her wrist deflects what turns out to be a cannon shell into a water tower a mile in the background is a priceless piece of over-the-top imagery—you'll either fall out of your seat laughing or applaud the audacity.

9. It will always be impossible to assess *THE CROW* merely as a movie, but it is a commendable ef-

ort. The pain that gave birth to Jackson O'Barr's original graphic novel is translated to the screen with all the agony intact. Though occasional sequences are botched, the overall impact of Eric Draven's resurrection (to avenge those who killed him and his fiancée) stirs up tremendous resonance, not the least because Draven does not enjoy his mission; it is rather a temporary purgatory which he must complete before the longed-for reunion with his dead beloved.

10. Unlike WES CRAVEN'S *NEW NIGHTMARE*, Wim Wender's *FAR-AWAY, SO CLOSE* doesn't match its predecessor, but it is moving and effective in its own right, a sort of grimmer, less happy variation on the theme. This angel's descent to Earth (unlike the one in *WINGS OF DESIRE*) is fraught with failure rather than romance. The last act turns into a caper movie somewhat at odds with the spiritual tone of the enterprise, but at least Wenders manages to wring a dramatically satisfying conclusion out of it. The note of sacrifice and redemption actually helps redeem the whole film.

HONORABLE MENTION

ED WOOD is not, technically, a genre film, but it's superior to most of the American films on the above list, and it probably would have cracked the top five had it contained any fantasy elements at all. Instead, we give it honorable mention as one of the best films of Tim Burton's eccentric career. Burton does his usual wonderful job of creating a weird world—in this case, the world of low-budget '50s sci-fi filmmaking—and the script provides more solid characterization than in most of his work. We all know Martin Landau is a standout as Lugosi, but don't forget the rest of the excellent cast: Johnny Depp, Bill Murray, Lisa Marie, George Steele, and Jeffrey Jones.

Likewise, it seems wrong to put a short subject like *THE WRONG TROUSERS* in direct competition with feature-length films. Still, it's a wonderfully amusing piece of animation, executed with genuine cinematic zeal. There are a lot of live-action directors who could learn from animator Nick Park's economic precision of execution. By the way, it's also tremendously funny. On the subject of animation, the 24th International Tournay of Animation was fantastic. Again, since it's a collection of shorts, it can't re-



Despite some misplaced emphasis and some uncertainty about how to resolve its third act, **WOLF** was an amusing satire of modern society.

ally compete for a slot among the Top Ten features, but it's still a great evening's entertainment.

Had I seen **LIKE WATER FOR CHOCOLATE** in time for last year's list, it probably would have made the Top Ten. Still, it played in theatres for much of '94; now we can at last acknowledge this sentimental fable about the power of love.

THE REST

With the two-part **HEROIC TRIO** series, director Ching Siu Tung proved he could make entertaining films without the guidance of mentor Tsui Hark. These efforts lack some of the warmth, humanity, and humor of Hark's productions: Tung opts for a darker tone, inspired (especially in Part Two) by **BLADE RUNNER** and **BATMAN**. Subterfuge abounds, and the plots are sometimes as murky as atmospheric production design, but the three leads (Maggie Cheung, Anita Mui, and Michelle Kahn) make an exciting team, and besides heavy doses of action, there's a sense of earned loyalty that lends the proceedings some kind of emotional grounding. If you like comic-book type superhero fantasies, these films might be the introduction you need to Hong Kong cinema.

With **CRONOS**, Mexican writer-director Guillermo del Toro made a good attempt at crafting a new sort of vampire tale. Although technical problems necessitated a severe truncation of the final act, the film's ambitious attempt at portraying the

human element of horror raises this well above the usual genre entry. Few shocks, not even a great deal of suspense, but lots of moral horror at watching a decent man seduced into a devil's bargain he doesn't really understand until it's too late to save himself, at which point his humanity re-emerges to save those he loves from becoming his victims.

MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN has got an essential core of power that at least partially overcomes its flaws. Sure, Branagh can barely stage a horror scene to save his life (for instance, the monster's Olympic high-jump over the ice, followed by Victor's slide down a Raging Waters-type chute is laughable). On the other hand, he understands the doppelganger motif that energized the novel, and sometimes he abandons the overheated attempts at sexing up the story long enough to concentrate on that motif. There is still a great faithful adaptation to be made from Shelley's overtly philosophical (though somewhat problematic) book; in the meantime, Branagh captures a lot of what's been missing from previous versions; and, all things considered, this is much better than the horrendous **BRAM STOKER'S DRACULA**.

INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE seems just one step behind **MARY SHELLEY'S FRANKENSTEIN**. Both suffer from mis-emphasis of elements in the source material, but **FRANKENSTEIN** does a better job of capturing a certain dramatic essence that holds the pieces together. **INTERVIEW**, con-

versely, is all pieces, since the drama of the story was undone by reinterpreting the events of the book according to a point of view that shouldn't emerge until the sequel. In any case, leaving faithfulness of adaptation aside, in retrospect it is apparent (courtesy of a thoughtful review in the *L.A. Weekly*) that Neil Jordan was far too restrained a director to capture the intensity of style in Anne Rice's prose. A much better choice would have been Ken Russell, whose wonderful excess seems tailor-made for the author. At least the production design, make-up, and photography were great, and Antonio Banderas was perfect as Armand.

One of the most moving fantasy scenes of last year appears in the otherwise misguided biography **IMMORTAL BELOVED**. Writer-director Bernard Rose is too talented to make a completely bad film, but with this and **PAPERHOUSE**, he keeps trying. After wasting too much time on who the "Immortal Beloved" of Beethoven's letters was, Rose finally gets down to what makes the great composer impor-

tant: his music. In a scene that has quite rightly been compared to the work of Ken Russell, Rose takes us into the mind of his subject while the 9th Symphony plays on the soundtrack. Amidst flashbacks, Beethoven recalls himself as a young lad lying in a lake beneath the night skies. Seen from above in an amazing optical shot, he briefly seems suspended in the stars reflected on the water, as if floating in the very firmament of the heavens, certainly a location gloriously suited for the famous "Ode to Joy." If only the whole film had been this good...

Although an uneven effort, **SHRUNKEN HEADS** was weird enough to carve out a cult niche for itself. **STARGATE** was a decent science-fiction adventure, not exactly original, but at least it threw together some elements we hadn't seen thrown together before. **THE SANTA CLAUSE** was good holiday entertainment. **CABIN BOY** was not half as bad as everyone said. Hey, three pages spent on listing good films, and no space left for denouncing the bad ones. Maybe it wasn't such a bad year after all. □

Some of the original novel's power does survive, but **INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE** de-emphasizes its protagonist in favor of launching a Lestat sequel.



SOUNDTRAX

by Randall Larson

KEEPING SCORE OF '94 Great music, if not great movies.

It was a good year for soundtracks from science fiction, fantasy, and horror films. Whether new scores from recent releases or classic scores from the past, these are my picks for best genre recordings of 1994.

Among the notable new scores was *STAR TREK: GENERATIONS* (GNP Crescendo GNPD 8040). Composer Dennis McCarthy successfully translates his music from the *ST:TNG* series to the big screen, utilizing a 95-piece orchestra, a large choir and plenty of well-integrated electronic effects. The score sounds great on disc, which includes as a bonus (you may or may not call it that) some 22 sound effects cues. British David Arnold composed an excellent, grandiose score for *STARGATE* (Milan 35697-2), largely symphonic, full of sweeping romantic themes and evocative musical textures which successfully matches the epic quality of the film. Remarkably, this was only Arnold's second feature film score. Colin Towns' *THE PUPPET MASTERS* (Citadel STC 77104) is another fine science fiction score. The composer has effectively made the transition from electronic scoring (his outstanding synth score, *HAUNTING OF JULIA*, finally reached CD from Milan early in '95) to large-scale symphonics, and this largely dissonant score contains an effective blending of both. The CD also contains some highly disconcerting and frightening textural effects—listen to this one alone in the dark. A lesser-known film with equally outstanding music is the low-budget pot-boiler *ROBOT JOX* (Prometheus PCD 125, Belgium). The large-scale symphonic score by Frederic Talgorn is a treasure, heroic and brassy, balanced by a lilting violin melody and plenty of battle music.

Horror cinema proffered little in the way of memorable soundtracks in '94, except for Richard Band's *THE RESURRECTED* (Intrada MAF 7036D). Band has scored little other than low-budget horrors his entire career, and one of his best, 1983's *THE HOUSE ON SORORITY ROW*, was finally released on CD last year (Intrada MAF 7046D). Band creates nightmare magic with orchestra and synths, a stirring, dynamic score rescued from oblivion by Intrada.

In the fantasy genre, Randy Edelman's music for *THE MASK* (Tristar WK-66646) was thankfully preserved on its own, apart from a songs-only soundtrack released previously. The score is a farcical mixture of melodrama and modernistic big-band music, cleverly mirroring the cartoonlike parody of the on-screen antics. The film may have been only a shadow of its splendid pulp origins, but Jerry Goldsmith's score for *THE SHADOW* (Arista 18763-2) was an excellent heroic work. If you can weed through the obligatory rock songs, Goldsmith's eight cues (about 33 minutes) are well represented on the CD. His main theme is superb, a grandly heroic gesture mirrored by many alternately brooding and pulse-pounding textural cues.

Varese Sarabande's fourth (and final?) volume in their *YOUNG INDIANA JONES CHRONICLES* series (VSD 5421) was their best thus far, brimming with dramatic adventure music. Laurence Rosenthal's scores for the episodes "Ireland" and "Italy" draw upon the ethnic music from the regions, held together by broader, grandiose, adventure themes. Joel McNeely's music for "Phantom Train of Doom," thunders along briskly, full of brass and percussion, smoothing out for a stately British motif or woodwind interlude from time to time.

Howard Shore's music for *ED WOOD* (Hollywood HR-62002-2) perfectly captures the sonic nuances of low-budget 1950's sci-fi-

monster film music, making good use of prototypical science fiction instruments, the Theremin and the Ondes Martenot. Shore even quotes from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*—the main title music for the Lugosi *DRACULA*. Contrasted are a number of beat-generation jazz cues, which provide the mid-'50s contemporary sound with their own sense of nostalgia and slight weirdness. But the score is more than an exercise in nostalgia, it's a finely crafted composition which works effectively as film music while also conveying a sort of homage to these corny yet beloved sci-fi music cliches.

In the realm of classic scores on new CDs, there were a number of recordings of older music which had been unavailable for years. Franz Waxman's 1935 *THE BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN* (Silva SSD 1028) was one of the earliest fully-developed film scores in a day when most films had very sparse and sporadic musical accompaniment. The music blends classically-styled motifs with a variety of inventive suspense and horrific passages, including an impressionistic "Creation" sequence mirroring sounds of the laboratory equipment.

Another splendid genre score hitherto unavailable in a complete recording, Bernard Herrmann's *THE DAY THE EARTH STOOD STILL* (Fox 07822-11010-2) was the fifth release in Fox's commendable "Classic Series." The 1951

The film was a dud, but the soundtrack for *STAR TREK: GENERATIONS*, featuring Dennis McCarthy's music, is one of this year's best CD releases.



If you weed out the rock songs, Jerry Goldsmith's fine score for *THE SHADOW* is well represented on CD.

score is a landmark in impressionistic science-fiction film music, built around the kind of atmospheric, two-note chord progressions that characterized Herrmann. The music is beautifully preserved on CD, unveiling for the first time the original tracks, including one cue recorded but never used in the film.

Another landmark '50s science fiction score released for the first time on CD is *DESTINATION MOON* (Citadel STC 77101). Leith Stevens' music is a finely crafted composition of muted grandeur, comprising in its slow pace a sense of restrained jubilation and heroic exploration. What *STAR WARS* did 25 years later with rousing crescendos and plenty of bombast, Stevens accomplished with a tranquil mood of solitude and stillness. Citadel's CD is a reissue of the 1959 Omega LP (one of two original score LP's issued in the '50s), that represents the music quite well.

Intrada's *THE CREATURE FROM THE BLACK LAGOON* (MAF 7054D) brought one of the best 1950's scores to compact disc. The *CREATURE* music—jointly composed by Hans Salter, Herman Stein and other staff composers (this CD contains only Salter's cues, though some of the themes he used, including the main one, were composed by Stein)—is a relentless, brassily horrific assault that gave life to Uni-

versal's malevolent Gillman. The score mixes its primary terror theme with a variety of pulsating suspense figures and a minor romantic melody to create an overall texture of brooding spookiness punctuated by sheer musical shock. Also included on the disc is a suite from the subtler *THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN* and two other non-genre scores.

The German CD, *MUSIC FOR FRANKENSTEIN* (Marco Polo 8.223477), delves back a decade and provides two of Salter's best 1940's scores. *THE GHOST OF FRANKENSTEIN* was Salter's only solo-scored horror film, his first major work in the genre, while *THE HOUSE OF FRANKENSTEIN*, composed by no less than six composers, is pure classic horror music, with its malevolent, monstrous foot-step-like chords, soulful violin filigrees, and eerie woodwind figures.

SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS (Walt Disney 60850-7) received a new release on CD. I've always regretted the fact that soundtracks to Disney's animated films usually featured only the songs, neglecting the rich orchestral underscore provided for their films. Last year, *PINOCCHIO* broke the ice when it debuted on CD with plenty of instrumental scoring added to the songs. *SNOW WHITE* is an excellent follow-up for what I hope will be a trend. Leigh Harline, Paul Smith, and Frank Churchill's musical score is intensely dramatic, often horrific, and of course frequently whimsical. Melodies based on the songs abound, as do new

Howard Shore's music for ED WOOD perfectly captures the sonic nuances of '50s sci-fi monster movie music.



THE PUPPET MASTERS featured another fine score by the notable Collin Towns, well remembered for his work on *THE HAUNTING OF JULIA*.

motifs associated with the evil Queen, the mirror, and various dwarfs. Painstakingly restored from optical and other track masters, the CD is a marvel of modern recording engineering, emerging pristine and glorious after 56 years.

Equally restored if not as aged was the *STAR WARS TRILOGY* (Fox Records 07822-11012-2 9). Containing more than five hours of music, nearly two hours of which was previously unreleased, this four-CD set provides the definitive collection of John Williams' seminal *STAR WARS* score. This CD set features remastered soundtracks, plus a special disc of previously unreleased music from all three films. This restoration is as much a milestone among soundtrack CDs as the score was among film music.

Milan's BRIAN DE PALMA - PINO DONAGGIO (35660-2) reprised the best of this fruitful director-composer collaboration. This CD features concert versions of music for thrillers like *CARRIE* and *DRESSED TO KILL*, conducted by Donaggio himself (colleague Natale Massara had conducted the original soundtrack recordings), including previously unrecorded cues from *BLOW OUT* and *BODY DOUBLE*. Donaggio's affinity at counterpointing elegantly sensual motifs with tonal dissonance created some excellent suspense music, and this collection nicely brings it all together in one place.

From Italy came a splendid collection of Mario Nascimbene's unusual prehistoric scores for Hammer's *ONE MILLION YEARS B.C.*, *WHEN DINOSAURS RULED THE*

EARTH, and *CREATURES THE WORLD FORGOT* (Legend CD13). Noted for his use of strange and innovative sounds as musical devices, Nascimbene scored these cave-man fantasies with an assortment of orchestral and invented instruments. Clicks and clacks and various acoustical effects effectively mix with dynamic and thunderous orchestral melodies to depict the primitive majesty of the prehistoric world.

Perhaps the most important release of the year was that of Alex North's legendary composition for *2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY* (Varese Sarabande ST-5400). North wrote and recorded the score for Kubrick's space epic, only to have it replaced by pre-recorded excerpts of classical music. After 25 years, we can now listen to North's original composition in a glorious new version performed by the National Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by North's former pupil Jerry Goldsmith. The masterful score maintains its own cohesiveness; unlike the disjointed classical pieces inserted into the film, North's music is intrinsically wedded to the visual story, embracing and defining Kubrick's themes rather than remaining disassociated tonalities. The music is vividly modernistic, as speculatively appealing as Kubrick's vision of the future.

A lesser-known rejected score was Christopher Young's music for Tobe Hooper's remake of *INVADERS FROM MARS*. Replaced by trendy synth tones from David Storrs, Young's intricate, orchestral-electronic music was salvaged in a 10-minute suite of orchestral cues

on *CINEMA SEPTET* (Intrada VJF 5001D, which also included Young's spooky, 23-minute score for *TRICK OR TREAT*) and on a German CD (Edel 22032) which featured the entire original electronic score. Young, horror music's most notable composer of the '90s, provided an inventive and complex, otherworldly score which can finally be appreciated on CD.

Trevor Jones' music for John Boorman's *EXCALIBUR*, though not rejected or replaced, was never released on LP or CD, due in part to the over-emphasis on Wagner and Orff in the film. In this limited edition release from England (Old World OWN-9402), Jones' fine work at last shares equal space with the opera excerpts. Jones chose to complement these cues in the film, rather than compete against them. His cues range from period dance music to choral motifs to majestic orchestral surgings. The score is well-integrated with Wagner and Orff, which are also represented on the disc. Vangelis' *BLADE RUNNER* also waited a dozen years for release. While a substandard, orchestral rendition of his electronic score was released on LP shortly after the film debuted (reissued on CD a couple years ago), the original tracks were unreleased, ostensibly at the insistence of the composer. Despite the appearance of a few of them on his *Themes* CD and a reported European bootleg a year ago, this is the first commercial release of the entire original score. The music is alternately smooth, sensuous jazz saxophone (representing Deckard's brooding solitude) sparkingly textured synthesis (representing the techno-ethnicity of the future), and a fast-paced adventurous theme for the film's conclusion. The CD contains a few snippets of dialogue, but these are quiet and integrate well with the music.

Also of note is the first release of Michael Kamen's score for *THE DEAD ZONE* (Milan 35694-2), a discomfortingly dissonant and suspenseful orchestral work, a successful follow-up to Milan's milestone release of Kamen's landmark *BRAZIL* score the year before (35636-2). Both of these were highly sought-after genre works, and their availability fills an important gap in many collections.

This handful of the genre scores is but an insignificance out of all the film music recordings issued during the year. Each, however, is a notable work and among the best I've listened to throughout the year. □

DTV
by John Thonen

DIRE STRAITS
Uncertain future for low-budget direct-to-video.

Although 1994 broke several direct-to-video sales records, the future of low-budget, independent DTV seems dire indeed. Distributors lowered prices and beefed up marketing, but Prism Home Video, a former leader in the field, was reporting sales off by as much as 30%, and Charles Band was fighting to retain control of his Full Moon company in the face of dwindling sales. The reason for this dire state will become all too apparent as you read through this year's honorees.

BEST HORROR FILM

Few titles were released in this category, and those were mostly sequels or rip-offs of earlier hits. With little else from which to choose, I'm giving the nod to Lamberto Bava's *BODY PUZZLE*, even though it's more thriller than horror. Bava's tale (of a killer's assembling a complete body with parts amputated from his victims) is nothing original. Instead, he's taken the limited *giallo* formula, which his father Mario created some 30 years ago, and executed it so perfectly that one overlooks the familiarity of the concept. This minor gem is a near flawless blend of mood, imagery, music, and sheer perversity.

WORST HORROR FILM

The toughest part of selecting a dis-honoree here is narrowing the field down to just one. Forced to decide, if only so I can stop thinking about how many bad films I saw last year, I hand the title to *THE CLUB*. This Canadian-made offal distills its "story" down to the most basic components: lacking plot and characterization, this is simply attractive people running round in interesting locations and occasionally getting killed for some reason or other. "We don't need no stinking logic," seems to be the battle-cry here. Well, I don't need this stinking movie. Of course, I watched it anyway. It's my job. But it may be time for a career reappraisal.

BEST SCIENCE FICTION/FANTASY FILM

Science fiction, by nature, is imaginative, but '94 DTV releases were a singularly unimaginative lot. Therefore, expanding the category to include fantasy, I'm tossing the winning roses to Full Moon's *DARK ANGEL* (Paramount). Though far



Though far from flawless, Full Moon's *DARK ANGEL* is original and imaginative.

from flawless, the film's premise, of a fallen angel escaping Hell to visit the world of the living, is both original and imaginative. Angela Featherstone makes an auspicious debut as Veronica, the unearthly beauty, and director Linda Hassani manages to use Charles Band's required Romanian locations to create a world that is familiar yet somehow unreal. The opening scenes in Hell are surprisingly effective, and the whole thing works better than it has any right to.

WORST SCIENCE FICTION FILM

The selections are far broader, but New Line Home Video released a sci-fi sequel with the added distinction of defaming its entertaining progenitor, so the coveted Golden Speed Search Award goes to *THE HIDDEN 2*. Though early publicity indicated that Michael Nouri would return, he is seen only in a flashback from the original minor classic. Instead, we are told that this story takes place 20 years later, allowing Nouri's character to reappear as a

different actor in some of the worst old-age makeup ever committed to celluloid. Since the sequel seems set in the present, we are apparently supposed to accept that the first film took place in 1970. It's downhill from there: lots of talk and running around, and a total lack of the action, humor, wit, and imagination that made the original such fun.

BEST CHARLES BAND FILM

After a near total debacle in '93, Band's company rebounded with several titles worthy of consideration. The winner is *DRAGON WORLD* (Paramount), produced for Band's family-oriented Full Moon offshoot, Moonbeam. An orphaned boy is sent to live in a remote Scottish castle, where he finds and adopts a baby dragon. Both grow to adulthood, if not maturity, and draw the attention of unscrupulous entrepreneurs who seek fortune with the beast as a resident in the title theme park. The film is blessed with an array of strong performances, the standout

being Andrew (Quatermass) Kier in a cameo as the boy's grandfather. With gorgeous Scottish locations and fine effects work from David Allen, director Ted Nicolaou helps one overlook that the last act is basically a *FREE WILLY* variation. Instead, the viewer is caught up in a gentle, innocent, and charming tale.

WORST CHARLES BAND FILM

Despite improvements, Band still offered plenty of competition at the low end of the spectrum. Again, there is a clear-cut winner, the mercifully brief (73 mins.) *TRANCERS 5* (Paramount). Though the original was one of the best releases from Band's earlier production enterprise, *Empire*, the final (we hope) entry is so lame as to demand a house call from Dr. Kevorkian. The film is a continuation of *TRANCERS 4*'s ill-advised plot, which moved future-cop Jack Deth into some sort of alternate-reality medieval world. Series star Tim Thomerson walks through the dull, unimaginative story, and the threadbare production values make recent Roger Corman efforts look lavish. An embarrassment for all concerned.

BEST SEQUEL

Remashes, retreads, and virtual remakes have become the order of the day in the DTV arena. As the formula wears out its welcome by virtue of a deluge of dreadful follow-ups, the only notable exception was Steve Wang's *GUYVER 2: DARK HERO* (New Line Home Video).

Wang's approach was to rethink the material and return to the character's roots in the adult-oriented Japanese *mangas*. Wang substitutes moody atmosphere and a troubled protagonist for the first film's campy tone and square-jawed hero. Of course, it all boils down to a bunch of guys in rubber suits kicking each other, and Wang is savvy enough to maintain a sense of humor about the proceedings. With great makeup, dazzling fights, and strong production values, he easily surpasses the original and serves notice that he has considerable promise as a director.

WORST SEQUEL

Last year's most crowded field was clearly the sequel category: *WITCHCRAFT V* and *VI*, *CIRCUITRY MAN 2*, and the double-wham-

LASERBLAST

by Dennis Fischer

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Great new titles and reissues.



THE CLUB, a Canadian-made heap of offal, beats stiff competition for last year's worst horror film.

my of Jim Wynorski with **MUNCHIE STRIKES BACK** and **GHOULIES IV**. After much soul-searching and excruciating video viewing, I bestow the title on **PHILADELPHIA EXPERIMENT 2** (Vidmark).

The film retains its predecessor's time-shift motif, immersing the main character in an alternate "present-day" where the Nazis won WWII, thanks to the U.S. government's continued work with the title process. This workable premise is waylaid by dull direction, murky photography, and pretentious allusions, however, the reason it takes the trophy in this category is the film's own hypocritical publicity. An HBO "making of" documentary focused on the "controversial" pairing of a black actress and a white actor. The promo featured the scantily-clad romantic leads in a bedroom, along with interviews about the still unusual casting. All of this was interesting and admirable for a DTV title. It is also totally absent from the film—no romance, no sex, not even a hint of attraction, making the characters' reunion in the "happy ending" totally superfluous. Heads should roll over this one.

BEST OUTLAW MOVIE

These amateur films, usually advertised in the classifieds of fan publications, are frequently awful and sometimes unwatchable. But one of the movement's godfathers, J.R. Bookwalter, proved with **OZONE** (1993) that a good movie could be made with no money and little professional experience. Less than a year later Bookwalter's film has been surpassed by **Scoter**
continued on page 62

1994 was an excellent one for laserdiscs, in terms of both releasing new titles and upgrading old ones. Consequently, I've made two "best" lists, one of new releases and one of reissues, and that still doesn't cover all the fine material made available last year.

NEW RELEASES

1. **JURASSIC PARK** (MCA, available in both CAV and CLV). It's hard to argue with the highest-grossing film of all time—over \$700 million worldwide. While it isn't as tightly constructed a thrill picture as **JAWS**, the computer-generated effects offer the best dinosaurs anyone's seen, and the THX digital sound is stupendous. (The problems that some theaters had with their digital sound systems getting out of sync doesn't happen on disc, of course.)

2. **SNOW WHITE AND THE SEVEN DWARFS** (Image, available both CLV and CAV with extras). No, it's not Disney's best animated film, but it's still one of the jewels in Disney's crown, possessing a richness of design and movement rarely seen since. Historically significant as America's first feature-length animated film and a justly beloved classic, it is available for a limited time only.

3. **UGETSU** (Criterion). This haunting ghost story is a certifiable masterpiece. (For details, see previous review in *IM* 2:3:59.)

4. **PRIVATE LIFE OF SHERLOCK HOLMES** (Image). Billy Wilder's take on the Holmes mythos failed to find an audience when it was released, though it offered plenty of old-fashioned fun. Presented widescreen, Image tried to resurrect the never-seen roadshow edition that would have presented two additional 15-minute vignettes that were part of Wilder's initial vision. The compilers could only discover the footage from one and the soundtrack for the other, but subtitling the footage gives a good idea of what it contained, and one can see what Wilder had intended the film to be and why he felt these segments could be deleted. This film solves the mysteries of Holmes' relationship with



MCA gives us **JURASSIC PARK** in both CAV and CLV versions, letterboxed. The dinosaurs are the best yet seen, and the THX digital sound is stupendous.

women and the Loch Ness monster. Wilder originally wanted Peter O'Toole and Peter Sellers to play the leads, but made do with Robert Stephens and Colin Blakely. The film also offers Christopher Lee in one of his very best roles as Sherlock's older, smarter brother Mycroft. The disc also includes an informative interview with one of the film's editors.

5. **PEEPING TOM** (Criterion). This unsavory tale of a voyeur driven to kill is said to have wrecked British director Michael Powell's impressive career, however, it still is one of the most inventive and powerful ruminations on what it means to be a watcher—especially of brutal, pornographic images such as films like this one provide. Disturbing rather than thrilling, it features garish Eastmancolor cinematography from Otto Heller, presented widescreen for the first time on this Criterion release.

6. **NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS** (Image, available in both CLV and CAV with extras). For fans of Tim Burton's elaborate visual design, this nonstop stop-motion feature is a feast for the eyes as well as a charming tale warning you to stick with what you're good at. The special CAV edition contains, as a laserdisc ex-

clusive, early Burton work including **VINCENT**, his Vincent Price tribute, and material documenting the making of the film.

7. **THRILLER** (MCA Box Set).

An anthology series which deserves to be ranked with **THE TWILIGHT ZONE** (itself the subject of two excellent box sets last year), **THE OUTER LIMITS** and **ALFRED HITCHCOCK**. While several of the best episodes are not included (perhaps to surface on a subsequent set), this box features six classic episodes of the Boris Karloff-hosted anthology series, including three ("The Incredible Dr. Markesan," "The Premature Burial," and "The Prediction") starring the master of horror himself. These episodes are often better than the low-budget fare in which Karloff often found himself mired towards the end of his career, so their availability is a significant addition to any horror fan's laser library. Additionally, the set also features: "The Grim Reaper," starring William Shatner and featuring a terrific Jerry Goldsmith score, "Masquerade," a misfired comedy made on the sets for **PSYCHO**, and "The Terror in Teakwood," the memorable variation on **HANDS OF ORLOFF**, starring Guy Rolfe of **MR. SARDONICUS**.

8. **ESCAPE FROM NEW YORK**

1994 IN REVIEW

(New Line Video). Complete with Kurt Russell and John Carpenter's (optional) running commentary, this stands up to repeated viewings as an inventive action-adventure film. It needs to be seen widescreen, and VHS simply can't match laserdisc's resolution for clarity or color. For more information, see the next installment of this column.

9. **ROBINSON CRUSOE ON MARS** (Criterion). Its attempt to be scientifically accurate falls woefully short, but **CRUSOE** holds up surprisingly well as a low-budget tale of an astronaut (Paul Mantee) who struggles for survival. The disc's real bonus comes in Criterion's documenting of the film's rocky creation via commentary and script excerpts, showing how director Byron Haskin was pulling for realism while initial scripter Ib Melchior invented a more fantastic scenario, full of mostly discarded thrills.

10. MCA's Classic Horror releases. While MCA has already released most of their first-rate horror material on disc, there's plenty of fun in viewing their various Encore releases such as *The Golden Age of Science Fiction* (IT CAME FROM OUTER SPACE, TARANTULA, THE MORE PEOPLE, THE DEADLY MANTIS); the **HOUSE OF FRANKENSTEIN & HOUSE OF DRACULA** double disc (reviewed in *IM 2:2*); the *Creature Double Feature* (REVENGE OF THE CREATURE/THE CREATURE WALKS AMONG US); the **MUMMY** box set (THE MUMMY'S HAND, THE MUMMY'S TOMB THE MUMMY'S GHOST, THE MUMMY'S CURSE); the **ARABIAN NIGHTS & ALI BABA AND THE FORTY THIEVES** double disc; the theatrical version of Spielberg's **DUEL**, his major television success prior to *ER*; and the *Abbott and Costello Meet the Monsters* box set. All films have been digitally encoded and feature trailers and stills as well. One hopes that other companies will make available their genre titles with the same loving care and attention that Universal has.

REISSUES

1. **STAR WARS** Trilogy (20th Century-Fox). Although the three **STAR WARS** films have previously been released in either CAV or widescreen, this is the first opportunity to get both at once. Additionally, the THX stereo is a much bet-



Tim Burton's **A NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS** is a visual feast for the eyes. The CAV laserdisc includes early Burton short subjects, like **VINCENT**.

ter mix-down of the original 6-track Dolby stereo, though the box is flawed by missing a small bit of footage from **THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK** and has some mislabeled commentary cues on the sparsely-filled analog track. The supplemental material is disappointing compared to the **ALIEN** and **ALIENS** box sets, and commentary is provided only by those still working at Lucasfilm who were conveniently on hand. The accompanying book by Charles Champlin is big on glossy pictures of Lucas productions but scant on actual detail and critical perspective. However, the historical significance of the trilogy and its place in paving the way for science fiction films to become the mainstream movies of the '80s is undeniable. Outside of a theatre, this is the best presentation you can get.

2. **THE ULTIMATE OZ** (MGM). Hitherto, Criterion's CAV presentation of **THE WIZARD OF OZ** looked hard to beat, but though that presentation deserves the sepia tones in its opening, this MGM upgrade is truly the ultimate. The colors on this technicolor film have never looked brighter or better, and, in addition to outtake footage, the analog tracks feature extensive recording sessions never before released.

3,4. **WAR OF THE WORLDS & WHEN WORLDS COLLIDE** (Paramount, both CAV). Paramount's previous CLV releases were from Eastmancolor copies of the origi-

nal Technicolor prints. Presented here in standard play from Technicolor prints, with **WAR OF THE WORLDS** for the first time in stereo, one sees a dramatic improvement in image quality in these George Pal classics.

5,6. **THE ROAD WARRIOR & MAD MAX BEYOND THUNDERDOME** (Warner Bros). Here at last are George Miller's apocalyptic Australian epics in widescreen versions that preserve their original framing. The former is still one of the most dynamic, hyperkinetic action films ever put to celluloid, leagues beyond the horde of imitators that it inspired, and the latter improves upon subsequent viewings as a mythic telling of the founding of a civilization.

7. **TIME AFTER TIME** (Warner Bros). Nicholas Meyer's directorial debut is one of the most exciting and engaging time travel tales ever crafted, with a cast-against-type Malcolm McDowell making a delightfully Edwardian H.G. Wells. Few genre films are as clever or as moving and touching as this.

8. **SILENCE OF THE LAMBS** (Criterion). Horror's first Best Picture winner presented CAV and widescreen for the first time with soundtrack commentary and a complete production history.

9,10. **THE HAUNTING** and **NIGHT OF THE HUNTER** (MGM). **THE HAUNTING** gets the widescreen treatment Robert Wise's

compositions deserve, and the remastered **NIGHT OF THE HUNTER** now has digital sound and a trailer that the earlier Criterion release lacked. Both films well deserve their reputations as terror classics and are beautiful monochrome movies to boot.

DISAPPOINTMENTS

1. **TERMINATOR 2: JUDGMENT DAY—SPECIAL EDITION** (Live Home Video). Although this edition does offer additional footage, the new 16 minutes contribute very little to the story, unlike the expanded edition of **THE ABYSS**. It simply becomes an excuse to encourage people to pay twice for what they already have.

2. **MAD MAX** (Orion). While at least widescreen, this edition is still transferred from the dubbed AIP print rather than the promised Australian original, which features much better line readings as well as Mel Gibson speaking with his own voice. Come on guys, this was a hit worldwide except for the United States. Don't you think the dubbing might have had something to do with that?

3. **THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE** (MPI). The cover promises that the film has been restored but it's the cut that has long graced video shelves everywhere, with no identifiable additions or improvements.

Coming this year are potential offerings from Mario Bava, Dario Argento, George Romero, and Sam Raimi, along with many other exciting releases. Stay tuned, and we'll keep you informed. □

The reissue of **THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS** (Best Picture, 1991) is in widescreen, with audio commentary.



FILM RATINGS

- Catch it opening night
- Worth seeing first run
- Wait for second-run
- Wait for video/cable
- Fodder for MST-3K

EAGLE SHOOTING HEROES

Director: Jeff Lau Chan-wai. Mel Ah Productions, 10/94, 113 mins. With: Leslie Cheung, Tony Leung, Joey Wong, Brigitte Lin.

Those familiar with Hong Kong's supernatural martial arts cinema will find this parody a real scream, but the uninitiated may find themselves baffled, rather as if watching AIRPLANE without having seen AIRPORT.

Basically, everyone you've ever seen in one of these films is on hand to spoof him/herself. The plot, ostensibly about a villain's attempt to usurp a kingdom and kidnap a princess (Lin), mostly follows the ways the characters criss-cross paths at cross purposes, always falling in love with someone who's in love with someone else. You'd almost suspect a Woody Allen influence, but faery tale references in the subtitles (those in the theatrical print are reportedly better than in the video) suggest MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM as a more likely source.

The comic-action set pieces are too numerous to list. Suffice to say that the tone is epitomized when the villain gloats that only a *deus ex machina* can save our heroes—and one

conveniently arrives.

●●● Jay Stevenson

EROTIC GHOST STORY

Director: Nam Lai Chol. Golden Harvest, 2/94, 93 mins. With: Amy Yip Man Su, Pal Shln, Kamimura Kiyoko.

This soft-core variation on A CHINESE GHOST STORY is not as gratuitous as one might fear. In fact, the sex is fairly well integrated into what at first seems to be a traditional Chinese tale: three lovely ghosts, trying to pass for human, all fall in love with the same man, sparking a jealous rivalry that threatens to upset their newfound life amidst mortals.

A snoopy neighbor gets suspicious, so the ghosts hex her into vomiting a variety of objects. Things get weird(er) when the man turns out to be a demon who sucks the life force from innocent local girls, precipitating a violent confrontation in which the three women combine their supernatural powers against the man who seduced them. (Funny the way this "traditional" tale winds up sounding like WITCHES OF EAST-WICK!) It's a pleasant enough diversion for those who must see every Hong Kong film, otherwise, you might consider just sitting through CHINESE GHOST STORY again.

● Jay Stevenson

RANMA 1/2

Series director: Tomomitsu Mochizuki. Writer: Rumiko Takahashi. Fuji TV, 50 mins, not rated. English dubbed.

Maybe Heinlein was right: maybe we do laugh because it



In the gender-bender Japanese OVA series RANMA 1/2, the title character is a man doomed to assume the form of a woman.

hurts too much. Consider the plight of Genma and Ranma Saotome, a pair of testosterone-crazed, father-and-son martial artists. On a pilgrimage to the legendary "Training Grounds of the Cursed Springs," Father Genma, bested in combat by his son, is hurled into the Spring of the Drowned Panda, dooming him to assume the form of a panda whenever he's struck with cold water (hot water will bring him back). Infuriated, Genma flings son Ranma into the Spring of the Drowned Girl where—you guessed it—the rules of the curse remain the same, but the physical form is all too human and very female.

Laughter and happiness are the furthest thing from anyone's mind in RANMA 1/2, the Japanese animated series now being packaged and released in the U.S. by Viz Video. In fact, everyone is thoroughly miserable most of the time and paradoxically determined to remain that way for as long as humanly possible. The relationship between Ranma and his reluctant fiancée Akane may at first suggest archetypes as wide-ranging as the fate-taunted lovers of Shakespeare's comedies or the Kanin/Gordon-scripted adversaries portrayed by Tracy and Hepburn, but thanks to the show's serialized structure—based on scenarios originally devised by female manga artist

Rumiko Takahashi and wittily translated to the screen by director Tomomitsu Mochizuki—there will be no reconciliation for these two, no time when each will realize the other's worth.

Blinded by the rapture of their pain, enmeshed in their own tragedies, the cast of RANMA tugs at your heart, even as you laugh at their foibles. Quite a neat trick, given a set-up that, in lesser hands, could rapidly devolve into THREE'S COMPANY smarm (and don't be mistaken; there's plenty of low comedy here). RANMA 1/2 rises above that fate through its take-no-prisoners approach to physical comedy and its generous attitude to-

ward human frailty. Suffer though the characters may, they can gain some comfort in knowing that their pain and pleasure are, for an audience, as poignant as they are hilarious.

● Dan Persons

ROBOTRIX

Director: Jamie Luk. Golden Harvest, 2/94, 102 mins, not rated. With: Amy Yip, David Ng.

You gotta give this film credit for in-your-face attitude, if nothing else. What can you say when the basic premise is that an insane cyborg is running around literally fucking women to death? As if to atone for this questionable antagonist, the film's title character is a female police officer, slain in the line of duty and revived in a cyborg body identical to her own. Comic and romantic/erotic interludes are inserted to balance the sexual violence, but still the main response this film provokes is an aghast, "I can't believe I'm seeing this." The unrated action is bloody, violent, and explicit. But even on its own terms, the film fails, side-lining the leading lady for the final showdown, while her wimpy boyfriend takes over—a plot point at least as sexist, if not as overtly offensive, as the premise.

● Steve Blodrowski

TETSUO II

Director: Shinya Tsukamoto. Writer: Shinya Tsukamoto. A ICA Projects (U.K.) release of a Toshiba EMI presentation of a Kalju Theater production, 81 mins. With: Tomoroh Taguchi, Nobu Kanaoka, Shinya Tsukamoto.

TETSUO II; THE BODY HAMMER, Oriental enfant terrible Shinya Tsukamoto's latest cyberbolic rift, is, among other things, a viciously black send-up of Nippon's self-image of wisteria-garden placidity as well as mech-suit-monster mangas and movies. In fact, an alternate title for BODY HAMMER's hyperkinetic metal-grunge family feud scenario might be: HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WOR-

EROTIC GHOST STORY borrows elements from A CHINESE GHOST STORY and adds some titillating soft-core sex.



The most colorful images in PAGEMASTER are the transitional CGI effects, which overshadow the dull cell work that follows.



Getting your ho-ho's worth

THE SANTA CLAUSE

A Buena Vista release in association with Hollywood Pictures of an Outlaw production. Directed by John Pasquin. Produced by Brian Reilly, Jeffrey Silver, Robert Newmyer. Written by Leo Benvenuti, Steve Rudnick. Camera, Walt Lloyd. Editor, Larry Bock. Music, Michael Convertino. Production design, Carol Spier. Elf wrangler, Christy Garland. Special makeup/animatronic effects, Amalgamated Dynamics. 11/94, 97 mins, PG.

Scott Calvin.....Tim Allen
Dr. Neal Miller.....Judge Reinhold
Laura Calvin.....Wendy Crewson
Charlie Calvin.....Eric Lloyd
Bernard.....David Krumholtz
Mr. Whittle.....Peter Boyle

MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET

A 20th Century-Fox release of a Hughes Entertainment Production. Produced by John Hughes. Directed by Les Mayfield. Screenplay by George Seaton Hughes, from the 1947 script by Seaton, based on the story by Valentine Davis. Camera, Julio Macat. Editor, Raja Gosnel. Music, Bruce Broughton. Production design, Doug Kraner. Visual effects supervisor, Gregory McMurry. 11/94, 114 mins, PG.

Kriss Kringle.....Richard Attenborough
Dorey Walker.....Elizabeth Perkins
Bryan Bedford.....Dylan McDermott
Susan Walker.....Mara Wilson
Judge Harper.....Robert Prosky
Ed Collins.....J.T. Walsh

by Dan Cziraky

There is a tradition of holiday films that revolve around the Santa Clause legend. Unfortunately, part of this tradition is that these films generally aren't very well made, and several are downright awful. The Mexican-lensed SANTA CLAUSE (a.k.a. SANTA CLAUSE VS. THE DEVIL, 1959) set the standard for bizarre Santa fantasies, although 1964's SANTA CLAUSE CONQUERS THE MARTIANS is probably the most notorious. The late Rossano Brazzi's 1966 effort, THE CHRISTMAS THAT ALMOST WASN'T, was brilliantly strange, right down to casting film heavy Mischa Auer as a somber, brooding Santa. SUPERMAN producers Alexander and Illya Salkind tried to upgrade the genre with 1985's SANTA CLAUSE: THE MOVIE, but not even big-name stars Dudley Moore and John Lithgow could rescue this silly Christmas goose. In 1994, two more films joined this tradition: one outright naughty, the other surprisingly nice.

MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET is 20th Century-Fox's remake of its 1947 classic, filtered through HOME ALONE auteur John Hughes. Hughes returned to director George Seaton's screenplay for the original film, based on the story by Valentine Davies, and worked his "magic" on it. Unfortunately, it wasn't the magic that made PRETTY IN PINK and PLANES, TRAINS AND AUTOMOBILES, but the magic that destroyed

HOME ALONE 2: LOST IN NEW YORK and last year's DENNIS THE MENACE.

The story is essentially the same, but in trying to adapt a '90's mentality, Hughes has obliterated much of what made the 1947 version a classic. Attenborough plays Kriss as a kindly but befuddled old coot who believes he's St. Nick, whereas Edmund Gwenn in 1947 had us convinced almost from the beginning that he really was Santa. Attenborough doesn't even have the right "look" to carry off the role: his belly isn't large enough, his beard is too short and wiry, and his teeth are frighteningly yellowed. Just what the '90s needs: a Santa with plaque and tarter build-up! Though Perkins and McDermott are quite good as the romantic leads, Hughes has added a plodding sequence wherein the couple splits, then has a contrived Christmas Eve reconciliation. The biggest changes are to the end sequences, involving the courtroom sanity hearing and Susan's Christmas gift from Kriss.

Overall, the changes only ruin the story, while Les Mayfield's yeoman-like direction enhances this version's flaws. It's as if Hughes felt compelled to put his "stamp" on the material, right down to adding an extra "S" to Kringle's first name. Hughes even considered changing the role of Susan to a little boy during the scripting stage. It should have been an omen when Macy's refused to allow their name or logo to be used, prompting the creation of the fictional "C.F. Cole's" department store and Thanksgiving Day Parade. Although the financially troubled Macy's was offered a hefty

sum (and tons of free publicity), their only comment was, "You can't remake a classic."

The 1947 production handled this material brilliantly, with a talented cast that included Gwenn (who won a Best Supporting Actor Oscar), Maureen O'Hara as Mrs. Walker, and Natalie Wood as Susan. Fox had little faith in this low-budget effort, and actually released it in the summer of '47. The 1973 TV-remake lost some of the original's charm by casting dorky David Hartman and dowdy Jane Alexander as the romantic leads (who never even kiss in the film), but Sebastian Cabot (Mr. French of TV's THE FAMILY AFFAIR) was a worthy successor in the red suit, and Roddy McDowall was a hoot as the dastardly psychologist trying to institutionalize Santa. CHARLIE'S ANGELS' David Doyle turned in a great comic performance as R.H. Macy, who is asked in the famous courtroom scene if he believes Kringle is, in fact, Santa Clause, then grumpily blurts "You're damn right he's Santa Clause! One hundred percent Santa Clause!" You can almost picture him storming out of the courtroom, bellowing, "Angels, let's get out of here!" The 1994 production has nothing to offer in the way of improvements, and will most likely fade into deserved obscurity.

On the other hand, Walt Disney Pictures' THE SANTA CLAUSE takes an original story starring HOME IMPROVEMENT's Tim Allen and makes a pleasant, entertaining holiday film. Toy company executive Scott Calvin (Allen) spends Christmas Eve with his young son, who has had his belief in Santa Clause

Tim Allen makes the big leap from TV to movies with THE SANTA CLAUSE.



Richard Attenborough fails to fill the red suit worn by Edmund Gwenn.

challenged by his psychiatrist stepdad (Reinhold). When Scott investigates a noise on the roof during the night, he finds a guy dressed as Santa. He startles the intruder, who falls to the ground. Looking for an I.D., Scott finds a card instructing him to put on the Santa suit. Not only has the body disappeared, leaving the suit behind, but there's a sleigh with eight reindeer on his roof! Scott and his son get in, and Scott first finishes Santa's deliveries, then is brought to the North Pole. It's explained that he's the new Santa and will have 11 months to get his life in order before beginning next Christmas' preparations.

Waking the next morning in his own bed, Scott believes it was all a dream, but his son has vivid memories of their experiences, as well as an ornate snow globe given to him by chief elf Bernard. Then, Scott starts to change: he gains weight; his beard grows overnight; his hair turns silvery white; and he develops an insatiable appetite for milk and cookies. Thinking it's a ploy to keep his son's love, Scott's ex-wife petitions to have their joint custody revoked. Still not understanding what's happened to him, Scott forces his way into his ex-wife's home on Christmas Eve, where his son uses the magical snow globe to revive his father's memory. He tries to make his Christmas Eve deliveries with his son; but when he is ar-

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Despite an appealing and athletic cast, **STREETFIGHTER** fails to work up as much excitement as even a fair Hong Kong film.

RYING AND JOIN THE FAMILY TANK. It is a more than worthy follow-up to Tsukamoto's TETSUO: THE IRON MAN, an '89 b&w cyberpunk shoe-stringer that blew a number of critical brain-pans.

The plot, like the first TETSUO, is a weird and breathless filmic potpourri, combining such disparate elements as the Cameron TERMINATOR series, the Cronenbergian oeuvre, and the most campified Asian monster-royales. As yet another of Tsukamoto's white-collared milquetoasts, Tomoroh Taguchi plays Taniguchi Tomoo, a happily married Tokyo exec (or "Salaryman?") who just happens to be totally amnesic of his origins. After he and his family are terrorized by a gang of skin-heads, led by the enigmatic Tatsu (Tsukamoto), the enraged man finds himself slowly metamorphosing into a deadly cyber-weapon. (Like the first TETSUO, the influence of Cronenberg's VIDEOROME is evident throughout.) Headed for a showdown with Yatsu's cadre of punks, Taniguchi is shocked to find his own identity inextricably bound with that of the similarly cursed mutant leader.

Armed with better production values than IRON MAN (including 35mm color lensing), the film is really less a sequel than a further meditation on themes from the first movie. While the extra luxury is a definite assist, genre fans shouldn't despair that Tsukamoto has lost his poverty-row vitality—for ingenuity and frenetic power, BODY HAMMER is lubed and loaded for bear. Unspooling at the relentless pace of a Japanimation OVA, the movie's dizzying, unforgettable, and often wryly satiric accelerations toward apocalyptic man-machine interface display more cinematic

brains and brawn than most of Hollywood's current crop of megabuck actioneers.

●●● Todd French

ULTRA-7

Directors: Kathleen Fee, Howard Ryshpan, and Tim Reid. Writers: Tim and Bernard Reid. Turner Broadcasting (TNT), 30 mins. With: Vlasta Vrana, Rob Roy, Dean Hagopian.

TNT's ULTRA 7 is the old Eiji Tsuburaya Japanese series, with a new and decidedly humorous sound track recorded by no-name Canadians. This series, obviously aimed at children, is set in the Japan of the near future when (similar to the Jon Pertwee era of DOCTOR WHO) Earth is invaded by aliens on pretty much a weekly basis. Luckily, the Ultra Squad has been formed and equipped with their own space station, submersible, jet fighter, etc.

The Squad includes Dan, who, luckily for the others, is in reality an alien that transforms into Ultra 7. In this guise, he can grow to giant size, fly, shoot energy, and use (seldom-invoked) X-ray vision. He also has miniature "good" monsters who instantly grow to giant size to help fight when he's temporarily outnumbered.

With his alien origin, flying, super strength, X-ray vision, and secret identity, Ultra 7 is sort of the Japanese equivalent of Superman. The odd thing is no one ever says, "Gee, I wish Ultra 7 would help out," or ponders where he goes when he's not flying around, higher than a skyscraper. Even odder, no Squad member wonders where Dan is when Ultra 7 is saving the day, or puts two and two together to reach the obvious conclusion—even though every single alien who invades Earth seems to know.

Almost every episode ends with Ultra 7 and the monster *du*

jour beating the crap out of each other, and a good portion of the shows have a lot of equally laughable miniature space battles. The original production must have been quite low-budget, because you can clearly see the stuntmen bouncing and stumbling around in their rubbery costumes; obviously, re-takes were a rare luxury.

What really makes the show watchable for adults is the fast pace and the new soundtrack. As Woody Allen did with WHAT'S UP, TIGER LILY, Tim and Bernard Reid have provided new dialogue. Instead of going for funny voices or zany sound effects, the voice actors play it fairly straight, but every once in a while there's a subtle, not-quite-right line that will go over the head of children but bring a smile to an alert adult. This may not sound so knee-slapping, but for my money it is a good deal funnier than MYSTERY SCIENCE THEATER.

Some of the plots don't make sense, and the loose ends seem to have less to do with the new soundtrack than with the fact that TNT, which was airing the show earlier this year at 6:00 a.m., has cut the original to make room for copious commercials. Everything gets recycled in syndication, so one can only hope that ULTRA 7 will re-emerge—and next time at a decent hour, so people who don't know how to program their VCRs can get a chance to see it as well.

●●● Judith Harris

JUNIOR

Director: Ivan Reitman. Writers: Kevin Wade, Chris Conrad. Universal, 10/94.

Danny DeVito and Arnold Schwarzenegger reteam in JUNIOR, with Emma Thompson, but the film fails to equal TWINS.



98 mins, PG-13. With: Arnold Schwarzenegger, Danny DeVito, Emma Thompson, Frank Langella.

All right, it was sold as a comedy, but it's got a pregnant man, which makes it science fiction, so we have to review it, understand? So, what can we say about it? Well, it's kind of funny here and there. I mean it takes awhile to get going, but once it does it's amusing to see the Terminator himself getting in touch with his feminine side and enduring all kinds of emotional-hormonal imbalances. As too often happens in American comedies, this premise isn't considered enough, so some kind of antagonist plot structure is thrown in. In this case, it takes the form of the always entertaining Langella, basically recreating his officious prick from Reitman's earlier DAVE.

●● Jay Stevenson

THE PAGEMASTER

Directors: Joe Johnston, Maurice Hunt. Writers: David Casci, David Kirchner, Ernie Contreras. Fox, 11/94, 75 mins, G. With: Macaulay Culkin, Christopher Lloyd.

Essentially, this is one long pat on the back that the filmmakers have given themselves, pretending that they are performing a socially redeeming service by encouraging children to visit the library. What makes this hypocritical is that the filmmakers obviously did not bother to visit the library themselves. The cartoon version of *Moby Dick* has nothing to do with Melville but everything to do with Disney's *Monstro*. Likewise, Dr. Jekyll's alter ego is a typical movie monster, not Robert Louis Stevenson's literary character, whose evil presence gave only a suggestion of ugliness

without actual physical deformity.

Animation was a dubious process for this subject, since the live-action character played by Culkin is stepping into literature, not a cartoon. The rational given (he's in an illustration) is one of last year's lamest filmic devices.

○ Steve Blodrowski

THE PUPPET MASTERS

Director: Stuart Orme. Writers: Ted Elliot, Terry Rossio, David S. Goyer. Buena Vista, 10/94, 108 mins, R. With: Donald Sutherland, Eric Thal.

"You Earth people are stupid—stupid, stupid!" is probably what any alien would think upon viewing this ridiculous misfire. For awhile, the whole thing looks like pleasant escapism, with the lead characters rapidly unraveling the mystery sans the usual skepticism that bogs down this kind of plot. Then the really offensive element becomes apparent—this is another film that supposedly celebrates humankind's superiority over aliens because of our individuality. But this film shows no concern for individual characters. We're told, quite clearly, that humans taken over by these parasites are not mindless zombies; they're still people, conscious and aware, but unable to resist the controlling force of the puppet masters. Then the movie asks us to cheer when the army guys start blowing these poor possessed souls to smithereens. No one bothers to stop and say, "Wait a minute—those are still people, who feel the bullets we're pumping into them."

If that doesn't bother you, you'll still be bored to tears by the conclusion, wondering whether there was any point to this exercise. Heinlein's novel may have been the seed from which this sub-genre grew, but many other works have already reaped the fruit, leaving nothing behind for this film.

○ Steve Blodrowski

STREETFIGHTER

Director-writer: Steven E. de Souza. Universal, 10/94, 95 mins, PG-13. With: Jean-Claude Van Damme, Raul Julia.

This unexpectedly dull action flick makes you realize how superior Hong Kong cinema is. The story is a mere trifle, but who cares? The real problem is that, for a film which depends on excitement, the visceral impact is practically nil, with staging and choreography that waste actors plainly capable of delivering the goods.

The one redeeming feature is the large cast of multi-ethnic characters, who somehow never get completely lost in the shuffle of subplots. Not that there's much characterization,

but some appealing performances from the ensemble definitely help. The late Julia tries (perhaps too) hard to make something out of nothing, and Van Damme deadpans, adequate as usual. Despite lots of razzle-dazzle, their final confrontation is remarkably unspectacular.

○ Jay Stevenson

FANT-ASIA

continued from page 21

"What the heck was that?" or "Can you believe this?" These films are loaded with eye-popping, brain-exhausting visuals that leave viewers drained. A film like *MAGIC WARRIORS* portrays pandemonium to the hilt, as a female heroine slashes away at gill monsters, mushroom men, tree creatures, and other bizarre monsters amidst acid-pits, warlocks, and magic spells; *12 ANIMALS* has a cute llama priestess summon forth the Chinese zodiac's 12 animals to do combat with a giant devil; *MODERN BUDDHA FIRST* features childlike, cartoonish ninja turtles helping a TV actor fight an evil "giant-cartoon-footed" warlock; and *SEVEN PEARLS* pits a pole-wielding young girl, a human pig, and a human turtle against machine gun-totting aliens.

Whether it's hopping vampires, ghostly flying *femmes fatales*, or outrageously skilled swordsmen, Hong Kong filmmakers are treading on the feet of giants, not because they are brave but because they are equals. *Golden Harvest* was the first to take that stomping step and prove that quality not hype was the key to international recognition. □

DYNAMIC DUO

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her burning passion as a spy to conflagrate all those opposing her master, an evil eunuch. When Lin recants her wicked ways, she uses her fiery sword to barbecue all evil doers.

Most recently, in *DREADFUL MELODY*, Lin plays a musical instrument-wielding warrior. For those who dare challenge the ability of her brother (Yuen Biao from *PEACOCK KING*) to guard her magical instrument, she unleashes deadly, dissonant melodies to disintegrate them into oblivion.

Wang, on the other hand, is intelligently taking advantage of her typecasting by starring in Tsui's latest Fant-Asia flick, *GREEN SNAKE*. She plays White, a giant snake spirit striving to become human by learning the art of love.

With such superlative films recently reaching our shores, these two superstars of Hong Kong cinema continue to leave their mark on the international film community. Not only does their seductive beauty and feminine allure enhance their work; it also sets them apart from their Western counterparts, who approach their craft with a purse in one hand and a lawsuit in the other. □

ULTRAMAN RETRO

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ous but expertly manipulated), and the show often displays fine camera work, including moody lighting and unusual angles. On the whole, energy and good humor manage to transcend the obviously impoverished budget.

When *ULTRAMAN* was "Americanized" for U.S. syndication, it was given the perfunctory treatment awarded most Japanese imports in those days. The dubbing is gloriously bad, at times offering some unintentional laughs. Because of the limited number of American actors employed, it is not unusual to hear the same voice from three or four characters per episode! Also, the dialogue seems to be a more-or-less literal translation from Japanese to English, which occasionally leads to awkward sentence structures.

Despite the success of *ULTRAMAN* in Japan, there was never a second season of episodes. Instead, there began a long-running series of sequels, each one slightly re-inventing the basic concept. Although many have been as popular in Japan as the original, none of the subsequent *ULTRA* shows was ever marketed in America, except for a marginally successful "westernization," *ULTRAMAN TOWARDS THE FUTURE*, shot in Australia in 1990. Many are available on the bootleg circuit or through legal video ordered from Japan, but these are untranslated and often hard to follow.

Still, the image of Ultraman lives on in Japanese and American merchandising, and the original show's combination of intriguing visuals, appealing characters, and nonstop action has kept the series alive and in the public eye for almost three decades. □

THE SANTA CLAUSE

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rested for kidnapping the boy, it's up to an elite corps of elves to break Scott out of jail and save Christmas.

THE SANTA CLAUSE has all the humor and whimsy that the *34TH STREET* remake lacks. Allen turns in an effective performance in what is essentially his first acting role that doesn't rely on his stand-up comedy persona. The makeup effects for his transformation are extensive yet not intrusive. Reinhold is a good foil for Allen's comedic barbs, playing his patented yuppie-weasel role. The rest of the cast is also good, with Peter Boyle turning up in a cameo as Allen's health-conscious boss. Some scenes at the end go a little overboard with sentimentality, but overall the film is quite satisfying. In some ways, it's quirky enough to become a Christmas "classic" on the level of 1983's *A CHRISTMAS STORY*, but only time can make that determination. □

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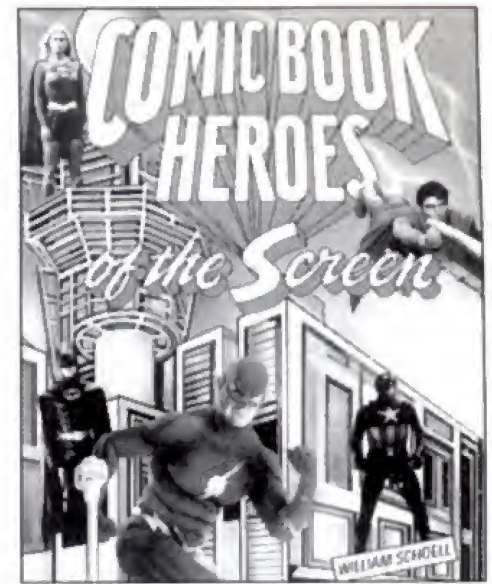
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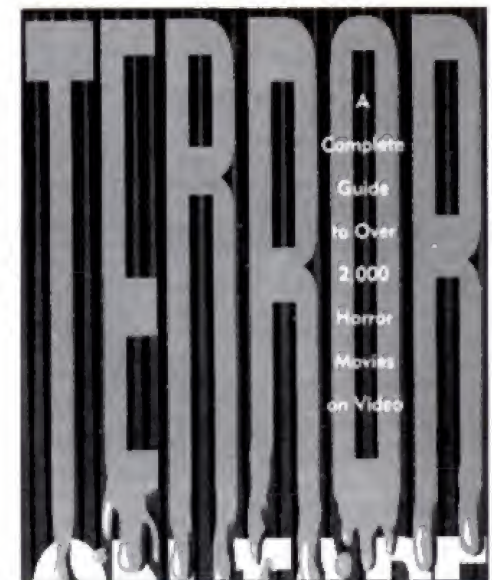
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LETTERS

FULL MOON ECLIPSE

I was a bit perturbed by a quote in the last issue [JM 2:3:46] of your otherwise excellent magazine. What I meant to say, before my casual remark got passed around, is:

"Charlie Band is an enigmatic fellow. He's charming, ballsy, innovative, with all this energy and enthusiasm. You really have to give him credit for all that he's created. But that same boyish enthusiasm started building studios in Los Angeles and Bucharest simultaneously; with sixteen films in production, it was too much, too fast, and he probably overspent himself. But the guy has nine lives and only used two so far. I wouldn't count him out by any means."

As I was unaware that my off-the-cuff remark would be quoted, I would very much appreciate your correcting my statement.

Richard Elfman
Los Angeles, CA

PS.: I am still a fan of *Imagi-Movies*.

[A word of explanation: Last issue's article, "Dark Side of the Full Moon," had been written before Mr. Elfman called and, when asked his opinion on the subject, made the statement in question. Since his comment supported other information in the article, it was editorially inserted. Mr. Elfman felt there was a tacit understanding that he was speaking off the record. We apologize for the misunderstanding.]

CORRECTION BOX

A brief letter to let you know how much I enjoy your magazine and to note a minor correction or two concerning WES CRAVEN'S NEW NIGHTMARE [JM 2:1], more specifically the article "Bulking Up Freddy," by Tim Prokop. I understand that on any given production it is impossible for everyone to get all the correct information regarding duties and so on, so I feel somewhat duty-bound to give and take a little credit where credit is due, no matter how minor that credit may be.

First of all, the article credits me for doing "most of the duties on the *Nightmare on Elm Street* comic series." I would hate for those who did work on that series to think I misrepresented my own credits at their expense, so I must say that, although I've drawn nearly every major comic book character during my eighteen years in the business, I have never worked on the *Night-*

mare comic and would never take credit from those who have.

Second, the article states that makeup artist Dave Miller was given a "simple sketch," drawn by me, of the new Freddy. I'm not sure what sketch had been given to Miller, but after executing dozens of preliminary drawings, I finished three full-color studies of the character: a detail of Freddy's new taloned hand, a full figure, clothed, for the costumer, and a (quite detailed) head shot depicting not only the likeness of Robert Englund but the specific scarring, the tears in the flesh, and the muscle striations beneath. Two additional color renderings were made during the production, designing a Freddy-like (scalpel) glove for Krueger to wear when disguised as a doctor.

I applaud Dave Miller for sticking so faithfully to my designs and helping us produce what I (in my biased opinion) think is the scariest incarnation of Freddy Krueger to date. And I thank Wes Craven for giving me the opportunity to play with his most indomitable creation.

Jerry Bingham
Woodland Hills, CA

BEYOND DRACULA

I just wanted to drop a line to say "congratulations" on an excellent "Movie Vampirism" issue.

Stake care,

Marty Ricardo
Director of Vampire Studies
Berwyn, IL

I found your Winter 1994 issue refreshingly innovative. Not the run-of-the-mill movie magazine that consists of little more than bad reviews. I'll be looking forward to future issues.

Lee Caldwell
Nashville, TN

The "Beyond Dracula" issue would have been improved by the deletion of the sophomoric philosophizing about vampire angst and alienation. To take vampires seriously at all, we are speaking of soulless, revenant corpses that commit acts of perversion and depraved murder. There is nothing human or pathetic in this, much less tragic. For Leonard Wolf and David J. Skall to shed a tear because "they're doomed to commit evil for the rest of their lives," or to opine, offhand, that "We allow them the moral latitude that we don't allow ourselves,"

is pseudointellectual, cocktail-party rubbish.

Similarly, how can anyone take seriously Patricia L. Moir's inane assertion that "The Jeffrey Dahmers of the world...are not, in any meaningful spiritual sense, evil?" At the very least, "spiritual evil" may consist precisely in making such nihilistic pronouncements.

I'm an atheist of 25 years' standing, so don't bother to dismiss this complaint as the knee-jerk carping of a fundamentalist Christian. And I've seen more than my share of vampire movies, blood up to my ankles and bored to tears. It seems to me that the vampire is more the metaphor of the modern welfare state than any conceit mentioned by your philosophers. But my point is this: life, love, evil, and death are *real* features of the world we inhabit, and that which lies beyond death is either miraculous or monstrous. Therefore, it is repugnant to elevate vampires—creatures of unspeakable evil—to the level of windows into the human soul. It is as repugnant as trying to slake one's thirst from a sewer.

Michael J. Dunn
Auburn, WA

[For the record, Leonard Wolf emphasizes that he is "not sympathetic to creatures whose entire destiny is to do evil," so it would be unfair to accuse him—or any other contributor—of shedding a tear on their behalf. Vampires, after all, are fictional creations that can be anything a talented author wants them to be, not merely "soulless, revenant corpses." And pardon me if I prefer to shed a tear for the plight of Louis de Point du Lac rather than over the fact that you can't afford a new BMW because some of your tax dollars kept a few homeless people from starving or freezing to death. Modern welfare state indeed!]

ERRATA

The CFQ Gremlins have been at it again: (1) One photograph in our coverage of MARY SHELLY'S FRANKENSTEIN [JM 2:2:17, lower right] is not Robert DeNiro in the Kenneth Branagh feature but Randy Quaid in the made-for-TNT production. (2) The Japanese films reviewed last issue [JM 2:3:59] are for some reason identified as "Masterpieces on CD." Well, obviously they're not on CD; they're on LD. It is after all a *Laserdisc* column.

BEST WORST DTV

continued from page 56

McCrae's SHATTERDEAD (Tempe Home Video).

Though set in the familiar genre milieu of the zombie film, McCrae's zombies are a far cry from Romero's. Intelligent and virtually indistinguishable from the living, they try to pass for "alive," all for the sake of love and companionship. McCrae has claimed Dante's *Divine Comedy* as a major influence, but the imagery (e.g. the female lead being screwed by a female angel) is certainly his own. Often shocking, frequently mesmerizing, and never less than interesting, the film is always true to its own vision rather than the dictates of good taste, political correctness, or commercial considerations. Sadly, it's the only film in this column about which that can honestly be said.

WORST OUTLAW MOVIE

For every SHATTERDEAD, there are a dozen dreadful "outlaw" offerings. As in '93, last year's offender emphasized quantity over quality. Todd Cook excreted several horror movies, but the worst was his abysmal anthology, HORROR-SCOPE. The trio of tales' lack of originality is tolerable (most outlaw films are derivative), but the bad acting, lighting, editing, etc. are not. The average clip on AMERICA'S FUNNIEST HOME VIDEOS is far more entertaining than this thing.

WORST MAJOR STUDIO DTV

This new category is something of a cheat, as there is only one title to choose for either best or worst. I include it partially because '95 promises quite a few major studio DTV entries and partially because I find it offensive that Disney was willing to slap their fans in the face by releasing THE RETURN OF JAFAR, a dreadful sequel to their entertaining hit ALADDIN. Cheaply animated, poorly plotted, and badly scored (with some of the worst songs ever in an animated film), this is a shameless example of Hollywood money-grubbing.

Low-budget filmmaking once encouraged interesting work outside the conventions of the major studios. With this type of film already vanquished from theatres, it now faces DTV extinction by becoming increasingly formulaic and just plain stupid. It will take effort to reverse this trend, and it will be interesting to see what kind of films today's DTV producers will offer in order to survive in a dwindling and increasingly competitive marketplace. □

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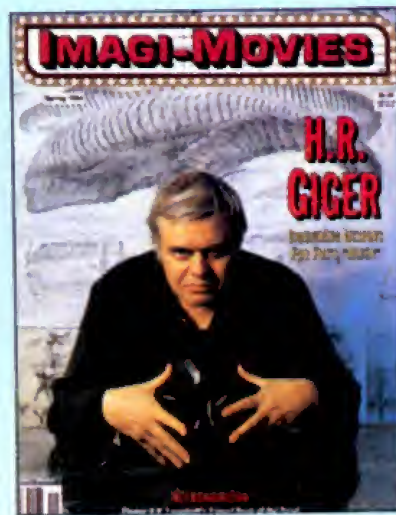
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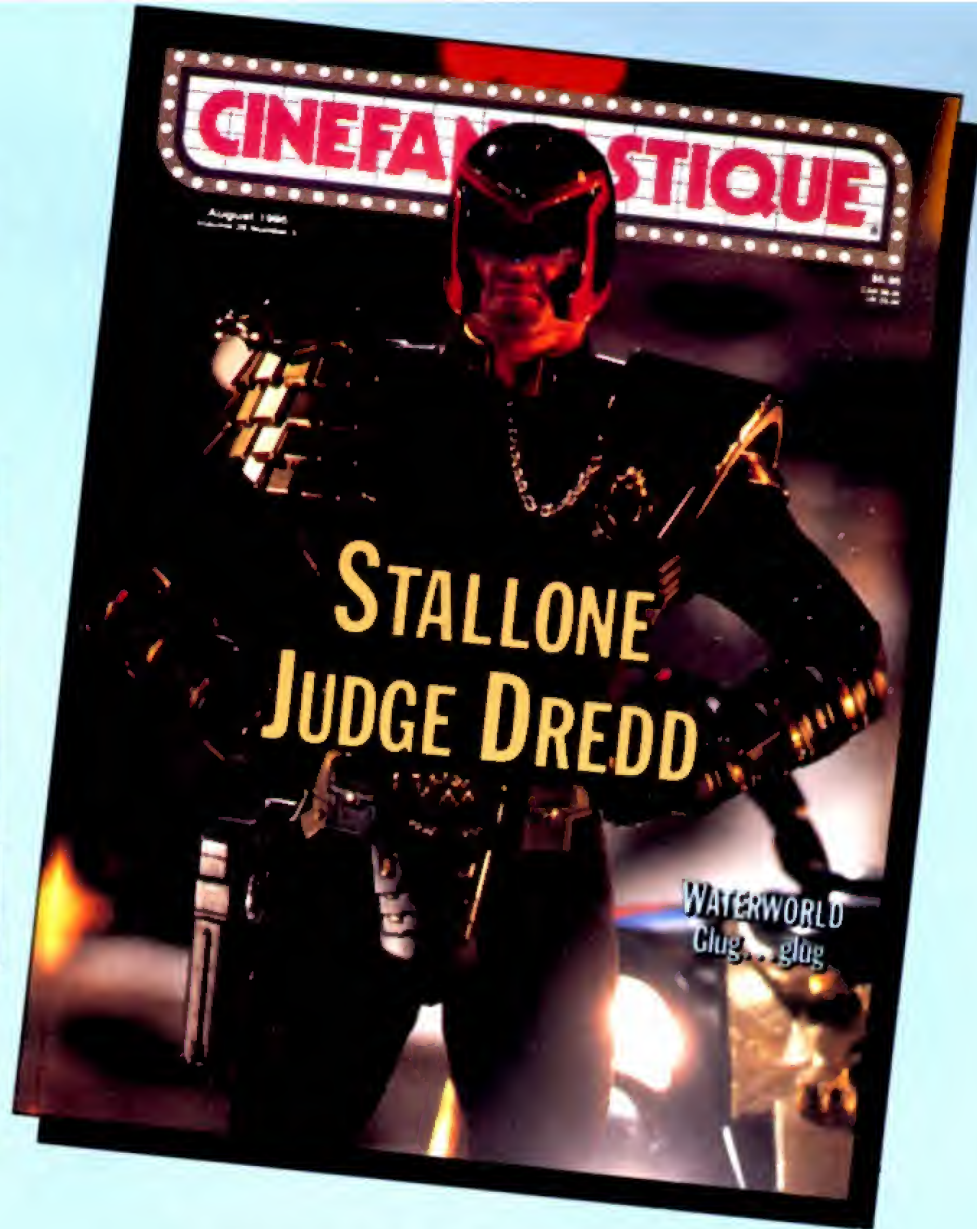
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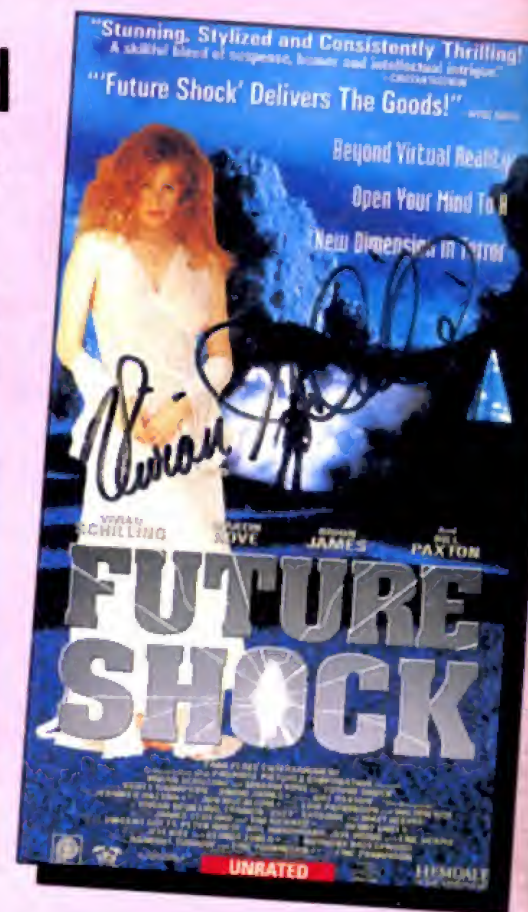
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